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**From vice cop to victim,
a true tongue-in-cheek
expose of what goes on**

BEHIND THE BADGE

By Paul Gronowski



Behind the Badge

Blueboy Library

by

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Foreword

A screaming suicidal woman teetering on a ledge high above the street; a young Mexican girl choking to death in the middle of a public park; a vice cop with his knees wedged tightly in a toilet bowl; and a maniacal sniper prowling unrestrained in Los Angeles.

Jack Morrison has begun a day he will never forget—a day that will change his life forever. A young, brilliant biochemistry major working part-time as a physical therapist for the city of Los Angeles, Jack has moved through life relatively untouched by the things that humanize men and women—love, hate, terror, compassion. Walking through his years in this semi-anesthetized state, Jack has a vague yearning for something emotionally and spiritually

enlightening to brighten and put meaning into his life. What it is exactly, however, he has no idea.

Then in quick succession Jack is plunged into dark corners of life few of us will ever see. Love, death, insanity and daemonic revenge tear through his complacent world, ripping its fabric to shreds. And the thing that can save him from utter despair is threatened with destruction by a deathforce shaking Los Angeles to its foundations.

The novel is not only an action piece. It also explores the search for identity of a young man—a search that nearly destroys him.

Chapter One

“I ’ll kill myself!”

“Oh God, oh God! She kept sayin’ that every day. I never thought...”

“She’s hanging from the ledge!”

“Better call a priest.”

“Maybe she’s not Catholic.”

“JUMP! JUMP!”

“I don’t want to live!”

“If she dives off that sill, we’ll need glue, not plasma.”

“Oh God, God!”

“JUMP! JUMP!”

“Get those crazies out of here!”

“I’m going to kill myself NOW!”

“All right folks, get back and give the little lady room.”

“JUMP! JUMP!”

It hadn't been a very productive day at all. I was standing awkwardly at the edge of the street, my right foot high on the curb with my left somewhere down in the muck of the gutter. Craning my neck up, I shaded my eyes and watched what appeared to be a tattered, gaudy red banner fluttering from the ledge of an attic window belonging to a run-down Victorian home. The banner was actually a half-crazed middle-aged housewife wrapped tightly in a loose-fitting bathrobe. She clung to the rotting wooden window frame of the window while she contemplated throwing herself to the pavement. Gathered about twenty feet from the front door of the house in a tight semi-circle were curious neighbors and passers-by. Most were quiet, their eyes turned up and riveted to the shrieking woman as if she were a sudden religious apparition. A few men in the crowd—strangers, I'd hoped—cupped their hands to their mouths and shouted up encouragement at the woman to jump. Two policemen moved through the crowd, pushing them back and glaring at the men who continued to yell.

“GO ON, JUMP! JUMP!”

“Hey, you two, you want to do some shouting in the tank?”

“JUMP! JU—hey! It’s a free country!”

“I’ll kill myself!”

The two officers grabbed the two loudest shouters, jerking them out of the gaping crowd and pulling them toward a black-and-white parked perpendicularly across the street as a barrier. Two more policemen appeared from this barrier actually composed of three patrol cars to take over crowd control. I stood quietly behind the tiny mob holding the heavy first-aid kit in my right hand, very conscious of the opened rear door of the Los Angeles Paramedic ambulance behind me. From the inside of that travelling hospital I could hear the faint, twanging sounds of acid rock coming from a portable radio. Paul Thatcher, the driver and chief attendant of the ambulance, had long given up watching the woman. He climbed into the rear of the vehicle, instructing me to stand outside with the first-aid box and watch for the first signs of a fall. He’d watched too many leapers chicken out at the last minute and creek back inside after being pleaded to by a mother, wife, sister or local man of God. Paul hated disappointment.

“She still up there?” I heard Paul ask behind me. He poked his fat, shiny bald head out from the dark interior of the ambulance and peered up at the fluttering mass of red cloth.

“I think they’re trying to get the husband in to talk to her,” I said quietly, still watching the screaming woman intently. I was afraid that if I took my eyes off her for one instant she would leap into the air. It was as if my eyes had the power to pin her against that weatherworn wall and keep her from jumping.

“No good. That’ll send her off for sure,” Paul said, humming softly to himself as he pulled his head back in and sat down in front of his radio. He fumbled with the tuning dial, making the radio send out scratchy, irritating sounds of static while he kept talking to me. “The old man probably drove her up there in the first place.”

I took my eyes off the woman for a second, turning around and looking into the interior of the ambulance. Paul sat like a Buddha in white in front of the receiver. His smooth, almost waxy face was always in a continual state of beatific relaxation. During this morning’s crisis, it was no different. His tiny, black deep-set eyes twinkled merrily as

he fiddled with the tuner. His short, pudgy legs were crossed tightly in front of him while his overhanging belly seemed to jiggle with every move he made. His calm was unnerving.

Of course Paul had been on hundreds of these kinds of calls—suicides, attempted suicides, murders, freeway accidents. He had been a paramedic for almost three years. For me, this was a horrifying new experience. Usually I worked as a physical therapist for the city of Los Angeles on the definitely unexciting third floor of Central Receiving Hospital. If I had had my way, I would have been busily filling whirlpools and slapping hot packs on muscle-spasmed backs. But because of a favor I owed to a paramedic friend and due to some three years of emergency room and operating room experience prior to my move to Los Angeles, I was standing on the north side of Franklin Avenue in Hollywood watching a wild woman threatening to jump. My stomach turned over again, and I had to fight the urge to vomit in front of everyone.

“You really think she’s going to jump?” I asked in a tense voice.

Paul stopped his hopeless tuning efforts and wrinkled up his face in thought. He

made a loud clicking sound with his tongue while he rubbed his right hand over his small, thick lips. It was like watching Jimmy the Greek size up the odds on a presidential race.

“She looks like she might do it,” Paul finally said, raising his eyebrows and looking at me with ironic amusement.

I felt the blood drain from my face as I held the first-aid kit tighter. If that shrieking woman decided to step off the narrow sill, I’d be expected to run over to what was sure to be a mess and do something medically constructive. As I am not a qualified paramedic—making a lawsuit and job dismissal inevitable should it be discovered I was masquerading—I hoped the only medical thing I’d have to do was pronounce death.

“Don’t worry, Jack, I’ll take over if she flies,” Paul said, chuckling to himself as he guessed what I was thinking. “I’ll bet Bob didn’t think something like this would happen while he was gone.”

Bob, or Robert Granger, was my friend the paramedic for whom I was standing in. He was somewhere in Hollywood now sleeping with God-only-knows who or what while I was standing idiotically poised for disaster.

“No, I’ll bet he didn’t,” I answered Paul, turning back to the sickening scene and watching as two policemen took the groaning husband into a side entrance of the house. He shuffled in without any struggle, still moaning about how bad he’d been to her and what a saint she was. I raised my eyes and saw the woman again. Her brown, frizzed hair stood out in every direction from her head like a dirty halo. Her skin was sallow—almost yellowish—and hung in large pouches around her eyes, nose and mouth. From what I could see, her body was about in the same shape as the faded, worn housecoat that hung carelessly around her shoulders. The only thing about her showing any life at all were her eyes. They sparkled and rolled around wildly with an unchained fury mixed with despair. Years of frustration and almost unendurable boredom had climaxed into this one moment of action when she’d decided to end her useless, thrown-away life. If one looked carefully, he could read that in her eyes.

“Better watch now, Jack. If she goes, it’ll be now,” Paul said in a low whisper as he crawled out of the ambulance.

I watched with a feeling of awe mixed with terror as the head of the husband slowly

poked its way out the window. Behind him and to one side I could just make out the figures of the two policemen who'd accompanied him into the house.

"Maggie," the man said, leaning further out and resting both his big hands on the sill near his wife's bare feet.

Her eyes narrowed and seemed to focus in on the moment as she heard that familiar voice. The woman turned her head to the left and looked down, noticing her husband for the first time.

"Get out of here! I want to kill myself! Get out of here!"

Her voice crackled with hatred and determination as she backed away from her husband and edged closer to the end of the window sill. I felt the kit slip out of my fingers and heard it crash to the pavement as I saw her body stiffen then start to fall forward like a tree that had just been axed.

"My God!" Paul said in a tight voice behind me.

I watched helplessly as the woman's body slipped off the narrow sill and started on its long plunge to the sidewalk. Suddenly there were two sets of arms and hands jutting out the opened window, pushing the screaming

husband back into the attic while they shot out and grappled for the woman.

“They’ve got her,” I sighed with relief, feeling my hair lay back down on my head as the two policemen held tightly onto her arms and waist.

“Let me go! Let me go!” she screamed, struggling violently in their hands as they tried to haul her into the house. As her legs dangled in mid-air while her hands clawed at the struggling officers’ face, I was reminded of what a fish looks like hooked and drawn out of the water.

“We can wrap it up here,” Paul said, relieved as I was that the woman hadn’t wound up spattered across Franklin Avenue.

I took one last look at the high window before I turned and walked to the front of the ambulance. All I could see were the soles of her feet, still kicking up and down as the two policemen pulled her screaming and sobbing into the attic.

“The shift’s almost over,” Paul puffed as he crawled into the driver’s seat and slammed his door shut. His massive weight made his every move an effort. I always wondered how he managed to pass the physical for the job. “Not a bad ending for eight hours of

boredom, eh?” Paul asked, reaching over and slapping me playfully across the left shoulder.

I’d been covering for Bob Granger since midnight. It was seven-thirty now, giving me just enough time for a quick breakfast before I reported to the Physical Therapy Department at Central Receiving for my regular shift.

“Just get me to the hospital,” I said, leaning back in the seat and closing my eyes. I knew there’d be a line in front of the door when I arrived. The medical treatment there was notoriously poor—all, except for the treatment the police received at the Physical Therapy Department. My boss, Greig Haffman, had turned the department from the shambles he’d found it in to one of the finer physical treatment centers for public employees in the city.

As a result we were always jammed, treating anywhere from forty to fifty patients together in any one day. After the unwanted excitement of that morning, however, I wasn’t looking forward to seeing Greig or any of his patients.

“Looks like it’s gonna be another hot one today,” Paul said as he backed the ambulance onto Gower, then turned west down Franklin. I opened my eyes and looked at the

low, thick brown layer of smog that pressed down on the city. It was the fourth day of a hot, dry Santa Ana weather condition. I knew what Paul was getting at. Santa Ana conditions were like the full moon. They seemed to make everyone a little crazy. The real crazies had a field day.

I could feel the early morning sun burning against my right cheek as we sped toward La Brea and the Santa Monica Freeway. Paul hummed snatches of that mindless tune I'd overheard a few minutes ago. As we headed south on La Brea toward the freeway onramp I started thinking about what happened earlier. I had never seen anyone pushed to the edge of what I was fond of calling the civilized fabric. Now that I had, I was desperately trying to make some sense out of what could only be described as an appalling event. A half-crazy woman clinging to the side of her house, threatening to take her life while people below shouted up encouragement for her to jump. It was as sickening as it was fascinating. What had driven her finally up to that third-floor ledge and pushed her out the window? Was she a phenomenon of our society, or an honest symbol of it? Were we all destined, in some way or other, to wind up on our own private

ledges howling? I closed my eyes and tried to make some sense of it.

“Goddamn it! Sit on that fuckin’ gear shift if you don’t know how to use it!” Paul screamed at the top of his voice. The ambulance lurched forward as I heard the squealing of tires behind us.

“What happened?”

“Goddamned stupid cunt!” Paul shrieked, reaching down with his right hand and flipping a switch to the right of the steering column. In an instant the air was fill with the high-pitched wailing sound of the ambulance siren. From the flashing red reflection on the broad hood, I could see Paul had turned on the overhead lights as well.

“What are you doing? It’s against the law to sound the siren on freeways!” I cried, pulling myself back up from the floor of the ambulance and peering through the side window. I saw what seemed like a sea of blanched faces and wide eyes as drivers jerked their cars left and right to get out of our way.

“It’ll be a free shot all the way downtown,” Paul said, chuckling loudly as he settled back and pressed the gas pedal to the floor. We shot forward, speeding down the

onramp and onto the bumper-to-bumper freeway. Some cars slammed on their brakes while others lurched into other lanes and onto the shoulder.

“If the highway patrol...” I started to say, then gave up. Paul was in another world of his own, giggling and almost jumping up and down in his seat as we threaded our way through the crowd of panicking drivers. The big ambulance swayed dangerously from left to right. We switched lanes with reckless abandon, often missing fenders by millimeters as we managed somehow to avoid detection by the highway patrol and finally reached our final destination, the Sixth Street off-ramp.

“How’s that for an early morning eye-opener?” Paul asked, his voice tinged with the pride of accomplishment as he flicked off the siren and light switch.

My tongue was still glued to the roof of my mouth. I turned my head and glared at him. I was torn between kicking him in the face and laughing. In the end, I decided to do neither and turned away, trying to catch my breath.

“There she is, Jack. Have a happy,” Paul said cheerily, as he pulled in front of the sprawling, three-story hospital.

“Thanks,” I mumbled, still trying to fill my lungs without gasping as I stumbled out the ambulance and waved my right hand over my head as a good-bye signal.

At this point in the story, I should break the narrative somewhat and tell you both about the person moving through it and his point of view in relating what happened to him that day. My name is Jack Morrison and I am what the city calls a trainee physical therapist. Essentially that means I do the work of a therapist but get paid the wages of a file clerk. Normally, practices like that lay the foundation for revolution. Actually, the city is doing me a favor. While working part-time at Central Receiving Hospital I attend UCLA full-time as a third-year graduate biochemistry major. It’s all a part of a federal-city program which provides jobs for Vietnam veterans and full-time college students. Because of my major and supposed expertise in the medical field, and because of some experience I’d had in Buffalo, New York as a surgical technician, I wound up at the municipal hospital on Sixth Street in the Physical Therapy Department.

Fortunately, I could manipulate my working hours to correspond with my classes and labs. Always overworked and shamelessly

understaffed, my supervisor was happy if I came in two days a week, and ecstatic if I worked more.

As to my physical attributes, I am twenty-eight, six-foot one inch, black medium-length hair that has an unfortunate tendency to curl up in the back when it gets too long, blue-green eyes and a decent physique that comes from not stuffing twinkies in my mouth at all hours and working out twice a week at a local gym in Venice. I have a scar on my right cheek extending from my ear lobe down to my jaw, the result of a barroom brawl in Olongapo, Philippines when I was a naval officer in the Vietnam War.

There are two more items I should like to mention here.

First, I am shamelessly intelligent, witty and imaginative (or so say my professors).

Second, I am a homosexual, having “come out” when I was thirteen.

Now that that’s out of the way, I’d like to say a word about the narration. I will let the narrating consciousness (me) pass along the events naturally; that is, aware of the past and present moments and unaware of the future ones. I will judge people and events in the light of what had taken place up to that point, unaware of some future plan from

where I would later have a more clear, objective and thus accurate view. That is, I believe, necessary to see both the growth or non-growth of certain characters in the novel and the inevitability of certain events that lead to the climax. This story is to be, after all, a mirror of an actual event—life, in a sense. And those of us mired in “life” are fortunate if we clearly see the present, let alone the future.

As I’ve written, I left Paul Thatcher and his killer ambulance behind me and walked slowly up the steeply angled sidewalk that climbed up to the hospital main entrance. The building rested on the top of a rounded hill rising high above Sixth Street. It was styled along the lines of the 1930’s Art Deco mode, although it was actually constructed in 1959. The architect appeared to be confused whether to remain true to Art Deco or “modernize” it with a 1950’s flavor. His confusion was appallingly apparent in the building’s construction. Long, narrow windows banded by chromium steel frames looked coolly down at the broad drive from the third floor while the first two floors had all-glass walls. Brass and chrome columns apparently meant to represent something in Greece guarded the wide glass main

entranceway to the hospital lobby. A long, wide drive curving up from Sixth Street completed the frontal facade of Central Receiving. When I first started working there, I wondered about the purpose of that drive. There was no parking area anywhere near it, nor did it lead to one. It was like the giant horseshoe drives seen in communities as Bel Aire or Scarsdale—leading from the main street, up to the door, then back to the street again. No one at the hospital seemed to know why the drive was there, shrugging it off to municipal stupidity. As this seemed logical, I too shrugged off the uselessness of the drive, seeing in it an indication—a symbol as it were—of some of the positions held by people at the hospital. But more of that later.

Central Receiving had once been a bustling establishment, seeing hundreds of wounded policemen and firemen coming through its rear emergency doors every week. Wailing sirens had cut through the thick smoggy air daily and nightly, keeping the surrounding grumbling Mexican/American community awake as the operating room lights burned twenty-four hours.

Those days ended almost as quickly as they began. Five years after it was built, the

hospital was suddenly reduced in its staff by a money-conscious new city administration. Services as in-patient care, operating room and intensive care were eliminated. Gradually the hospital became a ghost town, staffed by inefficient civil service secretaries who waded aimlessly through mountains of reports, old charts, and ambulance receipts. Their purpose was always a mystery to me, although I was assured by them that whatever it was, it was very necessary.

Thus in the end, Central Receiving had been ingloriously reduced to a mediocre outpatient clinic, staffed by well-meaning but hopelessly incompetent senior doctors who gave physicals, vaguely instructed the few remaining nurses where to slap on an emergency bandage until the patient could be transported to a normal hospital, and directed non-bleeding victims in pain to the Physical Therapy department upstairs.

That department, run amazingly efficiently by Greig Haffman, was located in a penthouse structure crowning the wide, flat roof of the hospital. Occupying approximately half of the roofing area, the department was physically as well as spiritually segregated from Central Receiving. Patient load had actually increased in the past

three years when Greig Haffman first took the job, from an elderly therapist whose idea of treatment would have been applauded by the Marquis de Sade.

Although the authorities that he were impressed by Greig's rapid improvement of both the quantity and quality of physical therapy treatment, they didn't give him any funds for additional help. As a result, Greig Haffman was a victim of his own enthusiasm and efficiency, a well-meaning scorpion who was stinging himself to death with good intentions.

My appearance brought relief to both sides. Greig was happy that he had some help at last. And the municipal government was happy that my salary was actually coming from the federal government.

I pushed the glass doors open and stepped inside the long, semi-lit corridor. It was just past seven-thirty, enough time to grab a candy bar from the vending machine in what used to be the employee's cafeteria, sit down, and pull my mind together.

Or so I thought.

"Hey Jack. Going upstairs?"

I groaned inwardly and turned around to see who had found me out.

“Sorry to bother you like this, but my back’s been giving me some trouble again. Last night I couldn’t sleep.”

It was Ed Jacobsen, a young blond patrolman who had started coming in regularly three months ago with back trouble. He’d managed to tear a muscle one night wrestling a tripped-out Hollywood hooker to the sidewalk who had been firing a .38 at passers-by. He was one of those job fringe benefits that made working at the hospital more than bearable. An inch taller than me, he had sparkling deep blue eyes that danced continually whenever he talked to me. The muscles behind his handsome face were always in motion, pulling and pushing the tanned, smooth skin into ever-changing expressions that faded almost as quickly as they appeared. Rather than make him look idiotic, that characteristic was so subtle that it gave the onlooker the feeling of intense psychic energy and a tremendous capacity for empathy radiating from the policeman.

Ed’s body still had the trim firmness developed at the police academy. This was a little unusual, especially after three years away from the training program. Most patrolmen started going to pot—literally—the day after they graduated.

“I was going to grab something to eat first,” I said, forcing a tired smile as Ed started to get up. He’d been sitting behind one of the long, formica tables in the cafeteria reading the L.A. Times. He sat back down and went back to his paper while I jammed my hand in my right pants pocket and fished for a quarter.

“Couldn’t sleep?” I asked, echoing his last remark as I found the appropriate coin and dropped it into the machine. I’d been wondering about Ed’s motives for coming up to the department lately. While massaging his back after hot-packing it, I could tell the torn muscle had pretty much healed. Medically, Ed shouldn’t be feeling any kind of discomfort.

Still I wasn’t about to throw him out with a hail of curses. If he hurt, he hurt, Greig and I were there to help people in exactly that condition (I never did let Greig get within ten feet of Ed, by the way). And if he was just play-acting, that was his privilege. Considering the job he had, I couldn’t blame him for trying to steal a few minutes away from it in any way he could. I often thought of one other possible reason for his continual visiting the department. But as I suffer from an abnormally inferiority

complex, I dismissed that hypothesis almost as quickly as it rose.

“Nope. I’ve been getting these twinges right back here,” Ed said, putting down the paper as I pulled the candy bar out of the bottom slot and walked to the table. He reached up to his right shoulder with his left hand and squeezed those rounded, smooth muscles. Tired as I was, I couldn’t help mentally licking my chops. Oh, well...

“We’ll go up as soon as I finish,” I said offhandedly, glancing down at the paper and noticing the headlines. SNIPER INJURES THREE. “He still loose?”

“Yeah,” Ed said, sucking in a deep breath and narrowing his eyes. “He got two cops over in the Newton Division yesterday and one in the Valley last night.”

Both the headline and Ed were referring to a madman who enjoyed tracking policemen and bagging them the way others love hunting quail. All his hits had resulted in injuries only so far. But everyone knew it was only a matter of time before someone got killed in the game. He’d begun his rampage four days ago, just when the hot Santa Ana conditions settled over the Los Angeles basin.

“Let’s get on upstairs. I’ll get you going before the mob comes in,” I mumbled through the morass of a half-chewed Hershey bar as I turned and started for the elevator. I enjoyed doing little extras for Ed, maybe hoping someday he’d reciprocate in some way.

Chapter Two

“**R**ight there! Ohhh, yeaahhh! Jeeesus. Ohhh.”

I could have strangled Ed there on the therapy table. As my fingers ran over his hot, greased-down back he was gasping like the star in a grade-B porno flick. Still I couldn't complain. While I kept up that cool, professional facade I was turning onto the feel and sound of that big hunk.

I'd just finished massaging the left shoulder and started to dip my hand back in the jar of Ungua Balm for more grease when the outside elevator door slid open and Greig stepped out, carrying his little brown lunch bag in his right hand and waving hello to me with his left.

“Hey, Jack, I ran into Paul Thatcher down on the first floor. I didn’t know you were working the paramedic squad,” Greig said, walking briskly into the large therapy room.

“Neither did I,” I said, flushing pink with embarrassment at being found out. My subbing for Bob was supposed to be a secret. But Paul had a mouth on him that was especially active when something unusual happened to him or to someone he knew. Certainly this morning’s event fell into that category. “What’s he doing downstairs, applying for a driver’s license?”

“Paramedic?” Ed asked, craning his neck around and looking at me as I kept working on his shoulders.

“It’s a long story,” I said, anxious to change the subject. I’m not particularly good at putting on a good “front.” Here the front called for an I-don’t-care-attitude. The fact that I did care about my job and the distinct possibility of losing it if it was discovered I was playing paramedic bothered me.

“We’re going to lose Jack to the fire department,” Greig joked, putting his brown bag down on the desk and opening up the appointment book.

“Oh?” Ed said, looking curiously at me. For the first time I thought I could see confusion and possibly a little hurt in his eyes. But like most of Ed’s expressions, this one faded too quickly for me to study it.

“Don’t worry. I’m hopelessly loyal,” I said, finishing up on Ed’s back as the elevator door slid open again. Four policemen and a fireman stepped out into the tiny corridor linking the elevator and stairway to the treatment room.

The stampede had begun.

“We better get hustling,” Greig said; running his finger down the page and whistling as he looked at the list of patients’ names. As Greig ran to the whirlpool room to fill the tanks I quickly changed the linen on Ed’s therapy table.

“Hot ‘un out there.”

“So what’s wrong with you?”

“Back.”

“Shoulder.”

“Knee.”

The usual conversations began as more police and firemen poured out of the elevator or huffed up the steep stairway to the treatment room. Just a few minutes after we’d opened the department looked like a crowded waiting airport lounge. Greig had

pressed for an expansion program years ago but gave up after a while when his letters were conveniently lost and his calls interminably put on hold. As it stood the treatment room was woefully inadequate considering the number of patients we had to treat. Approximately thirty feet long and fifteen feet wide, the main room had ten therapy tables pushed against the outside wall. On the opposite side of the room were two large heaters four feet high housing full-sized hotpacks used for injured backs and thighs. Additionally along that wall were Greig's battered wooden desk, two sinister looking ultrasonic vibrators, and an exercise table with weight attachments for knee and leg exercises.

Opposite the entrance doorway was another opening leading to the whirlpool room. About one-quarter the size of the main room, it contained two fifty-gallon whirlpool baths jammed closely together and an exercise wheel used by those wanting to work out any arthritic stiffness in their shoulders. Whenever both baths and wheel were in use, the congestion always caused minor irritation and accidents. Someone using the exercise wheel often bumped a patient sitting on the whirlpool seat

positioned above the water, sending him—clothes and all—into the tank when all he wanted was an ankle-soak. Or the man in the whirlpool might accidentally splash water on the floor, sending the arthritic patient unexpectedly skating across the floor.

Completing the layout of the therapy department was a room leading off the right wall about five feet from the entrance door. Small and almost always dark, it contained one treatment table used for the occasional female patient who came in, and a complicated looking mechanical exercise table we called the rack. Once strapped into its various neck, head, arm, and leg supports, the patient was stretched, tugged, twisted and compressed (theoretically, anyway) back to physical health. Greig and I rarely used it, however. Our patients carried guns.

Greig finished filling the whirlpool tanks and was busy coaxing a young blond police academy student into the first steaming whirlpool. I'd been so busy with checking names off the appointment calendar as the men came in and slapping hotpacks on their hurting backs I'd forgotten completely about Ed. Well, maybe not completely. I could still see him out of the corners of my eyes as I helped one or another groaning cop down

onto the treatment table, supporting his back while I nearly wrenched mine.

Finally all the hotpacks were on and cooking. The painful groans had subsided into something like sighs of sexual relief. I turned away from the row of occupied tables toward Greig's desk to finish writing up the patients' cards. Ed was sitting on the right edge of the desk, swinging his left foot lightly back and forth while he fiddled nervously with his fingers.

"How about if I come in at the end of the day?" he mumbled, looking up and smiling at me. He tried to appear at ease. But two bright red spots appeared on both his cheeks and slowly spread like a spot of ink on water to the rest of his face and neck. I put his embarrassment off to something else, not paying attention to the fact that my heart was pounding like a jackhammer and my own face was flushing red hot.

"Three o'clock looks good," I said, glancing down at the appointment book. Maybe I can send Greig out to write his name in the grass, I thought wisely as I wrote Ed's name in the book.

When I looked up again, Ed was gone.

"Damn!" I muttered under my breath, throwing down the pencil and running out to

the elevator. He was standing there, his powerful hands on his thighs with his back turned to me. The elevator door was sliding open and he was walking in.

“Three o’clock, right?” I said, noticing with some satisfaction that I startled him. Ed was one of those unusually self-possessed people who made me uneasy. I loved shaking up his reserve, wondering what the result would be.

“Right,” he said, smiling confusedly and flashing a look of tremendous intensity at me as the door closed.

“Hey, Jack, my back!” I heard several men groan out.

“Jesus!” I whispered, turning on my heels and running back into the room. Half the patients had pushed up their torsos from the tables and arched their backs until they looked like trained circus seals about to bark for the their fish. The packs were burning through the thick towel covering and steaming their skins. “Sorry,” I kept saying over and over, slipping more towels between the red, wet backs and the still-steaming packs while I thought of Ed and that final look he gave me. It seemed to be a look of yearning he took little trouble in concealing. Maybe he thought I was so obtuse I wouldn’t

recognize raw emotion if it rioted in front of me. That was certainly possible as I always kept up a cool facade (mentally I often carried a tube of KY and thought of disgraceful things as I massaged hot, wet, smooth, muscular lower backs).

Then maybe again that intense look of raw passion and desperate want was simply a muscular twinge brought on by his irritated back muscle. With my luck lately, it would be the latter.

“Hi, guy!”

I turned around after slipping the last towel over a screaming patient only to see Paul Thatcher waddling into the room. It was eight-thirty; I was tired; I was horny; my stomach growled to protest to the stale Hershey bar I’d tried to force down earlier; and now I was treated to Paul Thatcher. I smiled wearily and moved slowly back to the desk. Paul was one of those people who must be “dealt with.” His tired jokes, obtuse observations, abominable eating habits and occasional loud behavior wearied the most benevolent of people. Simply, Paul Thatcher was a screaming bore who people avoided at all cost. Being on paramedic duty with him for eight hours had nearly sent me wild into the streets. It was only when we received that

call about the screaming female leaper that I felt relief wash over me. Paul did things like that to people. You prayed for some unspeakable disaster to befall anyone to get you away from him.

“Hey, Paul,” Greig said cheerily as he stepped out of the whirlpool room. In the background I could hear the loud roar of the tank’s powerful engine swirling the waters around.

“Jack tell you about what happened?” Paul asked, sitting on the same portion of the desk Ed had been on. I winced at the contamination.

“No, what about it?” Greig said, wiping his hands on the sides of his smock and walking toward the squatting fat man.

“Well...” Paul started the long story, wandering away from the main threat of events often as his mind grappled desperately for the facts. When he finished, Paul rolled his flabby ass to the right and let out a long, hissing fart.

“My God!” I cried out, my eyes widening as he smiled contentedly, ending his gaseous emission with a short, sharp thwaaarking sound. I was about to give him a lecture on proper public behavior when he interrupted my first words.

“I’ve got to take you down to the department to sign the report,” Paul said, opening his mouth and revealing two curved lines of yellowing, powerful teeth as he filled the room with a loud yawn.

“Report?” I froze. That big mouth had told everyone I’d subbed illegally for Bob. Now we’d all be holding hands at the unemployment line!

“Just routine. You can forge Bob’s name if you want. But the old girl’s been committed—or she’s going to be committed, I don’t know,” Paul continued in his usual garbled way. “Anyway, the law says that if any city paramedics were involved in a case, both have to sign any reports. So you’ve got to sign.”

“Get Bob to do it. It was his case,” I said sarcastically. Right now I wanted to take my good friend Bob Granger and stick him head first into the whirlpool.

“We can’t find him. Besides, the report’s gotta be in this afternoon.”

“Better go now, Jack,” Greig said, obviously anxious that I get back as soon as I could.

“My back!”

“Hey, Jack, Greig! It’s gettin’ cold!”

“Can you stick a pillow under my belly! My back’s killin’ me.”

“Pack of old women,” I muttered, reaching back and unfastening the white smock over my clothes and tossing it into the desk as Paul slid off the edge. “I’ll be back as soon as I can, Greig,” I said walking out of the therapy room. I meant it. Every minute with Paul Thatcher was purgatory.

We rode down to the first floor in complete silence. Paul tried to make conversation, but I ignored his efforts and we both soon sank into comfortable silence. Walking into the bright mid-morning sunlight I felt a blast of dry heat almost singe my skin. Shading my eyes with my right hand, I looked up and saw the sky had been bleached white by the sun. It wasn’t even nine o’clock yet, and I was sure the temperature was in the nineties.

“Come on. Let’s get this over with,” I said irritably climbing into the front seat of Paul’s ambulance. The uncomfortable weather, Ed’s strange behavior and my empty stomach weren’t making me too pleasant.

The station Paul was driving to was just on the other side of MacArthur Park. We’d just driven past the west entrance to the park when the radio crackled into life.

“All units. All units, Female, Mexican/American, age five to six found unconscious at north side of MacArthur Park Lake. All nearby units respond.”

“That’s us, buddy,” Paul said, reaching down and flipping on the siren and lights. I gripped the front edge of my seat with both hands as we made a sharp U-turn in the middle of Sixth Street. Cars respectfully scooted away in every direction as we zoomed down the center lane back toward the park.

“Are you crazy? There’re other units around. We’re supposed to be signing reports!” I shouted above the screeching siren helplessly as the big ambulance swayed and rocked. I knew Paul was doing the right thing. That was fine. But I wasn’t looking forward to another emergency. The last one had miraculously turned out fairly well—at least for me. I didn’t want to press my luck.

“Don’t worry, buddy. I’ll be behind you all the way,” Paul said, whistling snatches of that tune I’d overheard that morning on his radio. He might have been one of the more competent paramedics in the city of Los Angeles, but Paul seemed to have an unnatural relish for his job. As I sat still clinging to the edge of my seat while

watching the fat paramedic almost bouncing for joy, I realized that he actually enjoyed those disasters. Poor Paul, I said to myself as I thought of all the latest wonder drugs and their ability to cure people quickly. Of course, there were still plenty of accidents to keep him busy. But I still thought he'd have been happiest as a paramedic during the Black Death.

"There she is," Paul said as we swung into the north vehicle entrance road of the park and slowed to take the sharp curves. I leaned forward and saw a small group of men and women gesturing at us wildly and screaming out things in Spanish.

"Muerte! Muerte!" one woman shrieked louder than the others. She was holding her arms crossed tightly across her chest and staggering from the crowd out to us. Her long shiny black hair streamed out behind her as her thin shoulders shuddered from her choking sobs. "Ayudala! Ayudala! Muerte!" she cried again, stumbling in front of the ambulance. Paul slammed on the brakes, sending me into the windshield as the woman sank to her knees in the middle of the dirt road and sobbed wildly.

"Jesus Christ!" Paul muttered, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. "Tell her to

get out of the way. I've got all this emergency shit in here that's not gonna help the girl 'til we get there."

My head was still spinning from the blow it received when I became airborne and slammed my forehead against the glass. I rolled the window down and stuck out my head about to shout something out when I suddenly realized I didn't speak Spanish.

"Muerte!"

"For God's sake, say something!"

"Va t'en!"

"What the hell's that? It's not Spanish."

"French."

"What?"

"Muerte! Muerte!"

"Look, if you want Berlitz, call him. I'm getting out of here."

The atmosphere in the ambulance suddenly became thick and nauseous. My brain was buzzy, spinning sickeningly because of the blow. My empty stomach kept turning over, shaking itself violently upside down to spill out whatever was inside. Thank God all it had to eject was a rotten, half-digested Hershey Bar.

"Ayudala!" the woman cried as I stumbled out the ambulance and headed for a tiny grove of trees to the right. She jumped

like a lioness after her prey, sprinting several across the road to me as I grabbed onto one eucalyptus for support and started to vomit.

“Ay udala! Muerte!” she kept shrieking, wrapping her hands around my waist as the bitter, yellowish green bile flowed over my tongue and out onto the dried brown grass.

“El señor,” I managed to gasp out, reaching down and trying to pry her hands away from my stomach. She was keeping it upside down. El señor alli puede ayudarte,” I said in miserably poor Spanish, thanking God for a sudden flash of high school foreign language training.

I felt the pressure ease around my stomach. At the same time, my nausea gradually faded. Pushing myself around from the tree, I looked at the woman who by now had let go and was looking at the shouting crowd. She turned around and flashed me a wild look of despair. I guessed she was about thirty, though the criss-crossed wrinkles on her neck and face added another ten years to her. Long, wet lines streaked her flushed cheeks while her eyes glistened with the promise of more tears. Her thin body wrapped in a long, fluttering black cotton dress looked as if it would blow away like a

delicate banner in the strong Santa Ana winds.

“Goddman it, Jack. Come over here!” I heard Paul shouting at the top of his voice.

I reached down and grabbed the woman by the right hand, running as fast as I could across the road and dragging her wailing behind me.

“She’s swallowed something. We’ll have to get it out,” Paul said grimly as I ran breathlessly up to him. Two older women grabbed who I guessed to be the mother and held her back as I knelt down opposite Paul. Between us was a frail-looking, delicate little girl dressed in a frilly white pinafore-type gown. She was gagging and her skin was becoming more pale by the second.

“She’s cyanotic!” Paul said, jumping up and scooping the girl in his big arms at the same time. I felt just as helpless as the mother as we ran to the back of the ambulance.

“Get the oxygen ready,” he said to me as he propped up his right leg on the rear tail of the ambulance, then turned the girl over on her belly and rested her on the back of his leg.

At the same time I jumped into the opened end of the ambulance, flinging open

a large white door of the portable emergency cabinet and dragging out the tanks and tubes of the oxygen machine. I could hear the people muttering loudly as Paul started slapping her hand on the back.

“If it doesn’t come out, we’ll have to do a track,” he said more grimly than before, reaching up with his right hand and bringing it down hard against the little girl’s back one more time.

“Here? Open her up in this pigsty?” I said in disbelief, fumbling with the dials to get a high mixture of oxygen in the machine. I looked up from the rear of the ambulance and saw the mother again. She was staring down in hopeless grief at the still form of her daughter. Paul thwacked the girl another time, then looked up at me.

“Get the tracheotomy set. It’s next to where the oxygen set was.”

My blood froze as I stumbled back toward the emergency cabinet. When I reached the opened door, I searched the empty space frantically, finding nothing.”

“Goddman it! Hurry...” Paul started to say. Then I heard coughing, choking sounds. Whatever had lodged in the girl’s throat was gone. “Come on and help me with the oxygen.”

I stumbled back, feeling utterly stupid and uselessly as I fumbled with the oxygen tanks. Paul had turned the girl around, resting her body comfortably across his legs as he held the opaque yellowish mask tightly to her mouth. The mother sobbed something that sounded like Spanish thank-you's while the crowd murmured in obvious approval.

"We'll have to take her to the hospital for a check-up. But I think she's gonna be okay," Paul said, motioning some kind of sign-language to the mother who seemed to understand him.

"I'll take her," I said as Paul slipped out from under her to make a radio call.

"See? It wasn't so bad, buddy boy. All you need is a little cool," Paul said, peeling back his upper lip and grinning at me for a second. I couldn't tell what I felt more at the moment—revulsion toward him, or swelling thanks for saving that little girl's life. All that wonderful knowledge and technique stuffed into such a revolting shell of a man!

I kept the mask on her until she fluttered her eyelids. In a second her eyes were opened and she was staring directly into my eyes. I could feel her body squirm weakly as she tried to push the mask off her face and climb off my knees.

The woman moved up to the girl and stroked her long black hair, muttering something to her in Spanish and fighting back the tears as she smiled to her daughter. Suddenly I felt terribly out of place in this intimate, family scene. I even wished Paul were back here to keep me company.

“Look out!” a loud, male voice suddenly screamed out from somewhere nearby.

The men and women in the crowd looked as bewildered as I felt as the air was filled with a crashing, ripping sound. One of the women pointed to a small, rectangular pink stuccoed building about forty feet away from the ambulance. There were two small, screened windows high up on either side of the rear wall. From one of them came a thick cloud of dust and plaster filtering into the hot air.

Looking a little closer at the building, I could make out the word MEN stenciled to the right of one of the windows.

The first cry was followed by a confusion of shouts and the sounds of running feet. The startled crowd and I were greeted by the sight of four men sprinting out of the narrow men’s room door. Their faces were ashen and their eyes wide with surprise and terror as they glanced back quickly at the

building, then ran faster toward the north exit of the park.

“Jesus Christ!” someone shouted loudly next to me. I turned around and saw a tall, husky Anglo poured into a tight-fitting white T-shirt and clinging faded Levi’s running toward the building. Paul stuck his head out the side window of the ambulance, asking me what had happened.

“I—I...” I stammered, finally shrugging my shoulders as I watched the big blond run into the pink building.

Several seconds later he ran out, stopping just in front of the doorway and looking wildly around. He seemed to spot us for the second time and ran quickly over to me.

“Come on, doc. My partner’s in there! For God’s sake, come on!” he said to me breathlessly, reaching down and grabbing my right arm.

“What is it?” I asked, still trying to hold onto the little girl and keep her oxygen mask in place. I didn’t feel like getting involved with another crazy so early in the day.

“My partner,” he said, reaching back and pulling his wallet from his right rear pocket. He flipped it open and showed me a police badge.

“Here. Aqui,” I said, handing the girl over to the mother and showing her how to keep the mask safely over her daughter’s mouth. Somehow I was still sure this man was a crazy. But curiosity was killing me. Paul was still shouting for an explanation as I followed the big blond across the grass toward the men’s room.

When I walked in behind him I couldn’t see anything at first. There was a sharp, pungent smell of stale urine that made me gag as I turned to the right and looked down a row of three stalls. The cement floor was wet with what I hoped was water and covered with a thin layer of decomposing paper towels. The damp, cool air inside contrasted pleasantly with the hot dry wind raking across the park.

“In here,” the blond officer said, standing in front of the last stall.

As I walked toward him I could hear the sounds of someone moaning softly over the regular hissing sounds of the running water over the urinals. I reached the doorway to the stall in question and for some reason looked up.

“What happened?” I asked curiously. There was a big black hole directly over the stall where plaster should be. A rusted,

broken pipe hung lazily down from one edge of the jagged tear in the ceiling.

“My God, my God!” someone moaned in front of me.

My eyes shifted down slowly, noticing phone numbers scrawled in black magic marker and pencil on the walls that promised limitless joys at the end of the writer’s cock. The wall between this stall and the next was covered with messages and epithets, broken only by an occasional hole or two at thigh-level.

“For Christ’s sake, don’t stand there. Do something!” the blond cop almost shouted.

My eyes finally became accustomed to the dark and I looked down at the toilet bowl. There was a man where it should be. His back was toward me. As I looked more closely, I could see that his heels were visible over the front lip of the toilet bowl angled up. His hands were outstretched and tightly pressed to either wall of the tiny stall. It looked as if he were trying to lift himself out of this ridiculous praying position.

“What the hell...?” I started to ask. Then I realized the man’s knees were buried inside the toilet bowl.

“He fell,” the blond officer said as I turned and looked questioningly at him.

“Get me out of here! Oh shit! I think they’re broken,” the dark-haired cop in the toilet bowl wailed as he tried to raise himself up.

Vice, I thought as I ran out and tried to keep from laughing.

Chapter Three

“C areful. Easy.”

“UHHHHHH!!”

“Jesus, he’s a heavy mothuh!”

“SHIT! YOU’RE KILLIN’ ME!!”

“Almost out.”

“AHHHHHH!!”

Paul and I struggled on either side of the screaming vice cop as we tried to pry him out of the toilet bowl. Whatever my personal feelings were, I knew his knees and possibly legs might be fractured or even broken from that fall.

“Okay. Don’t move him around too much, Jack. We’ll have to take him to the hospital like this,” Paul said as we successfully lifted the big man out of the toilet and held him suspended over the swirling waters. His

pants were soaked and dripped onto my legs as we tried to figure out how to get him out of the stall.

“Jack, you go in front. I’ll follow up. You, blondie, you hold his legs up like that. I don’t want him to straighten anything until we get some X-rays of those knees,” Paul ordered.

“Christ, he weighs a ton!” I grunted, moving one foot behind the other as I tried backing out of the tight stall.

“ARRRGHHH!” the vice cop screamed as I banged his right injured knee hard against the wooden door frame.

“Sorry,” I muttered, shifting my grip around his thighs and moving to the left.

“AHHHHHHH!” He cried out again, throwing his head back and screaming like an affronted ghost as Paul bumped the left knee against the epistolary wall.

“Are you the keystone cops or somethin’?” the blond police officer said in exasperation as he watched us trying to move his partner out.

“Listen, you. We don’t hang around the ceilings of men’s rooms,” Paul countered, flashing a look of amused sarcasm at the furiously blushing vice cop. “I don’t think I’ve ever carried anyone out of a toilet stall

like this. And I'm damned sure I've never pried someone out of a toilet bowl."

"It's our job," the blond cop said under his breath as I was finally able to back completely out of the stall and into the narrow space running between the toilets and the sinks.

"My tax money for this," Paul muttered, glancing back at the rip in the ceiling as he followed me out.

"Watch out for the handles," I said, backing closer toward the doorway. Paul and I had to hold the groaning vice cop above waist-level to work him easily past the sinks and the stalls. Under him was his partner, holding his legs up by the foreleg with both hands.

"ARRRGHHH!"

"Sorry," I muttered again, realizing that we'd just crashed him into the faucet of the third sink.

"For Christ's sake, you wanna KILL him?" his partner said.

I passed on a witty answer, mumbling another apology as I slipped on a wet paper towel near the doorway and slid backward, nearly pulling his legs apart as if they belonged to a turkey wishbone.

We finally made it to the outside and started for the ambulance. Our shouts, directions, screams and cries had attracted a larger crowd than had the wailing Mexican woman. I saw a sea of curious eyes staring at us as we carried the kneeling policeman toward the ambulance. I occurred to me we looked like two moving men loading a grotesque parody of a religious statue into a waiting truck.

“Okay, folks, show’s over,” Paul said as he helped me slide the grunting vice officer into the back. We helped the Mexican woman and her now-conscious daughter in after the two policemen, slamming the doors shut and running up to the front of the ambulance.

“Why don’t you drop me off at the hospital. I’ll sign the report later,” I said, feeling drained emotionally and physically. Running around with Paul Thatcher seemed to be inviting disaster. My mind buzzed worse than before. I wanted to go back to the physical therapy department where the most critical thing happening was a short in the vibrator.

“Okay. I’ll hit the siren and you crawl back there and chart down what happened with the cops,” Paul said, jamming his foot

down hard on the gas pedal and peeling out of the park.

I slid off the seat and stumbled back to the tiny crouching crowd. Smiling encouragingly at the worried Mexican mother, I turned around to the two policemen who sat grimly on the opposite side.

“Okay. What happened?” I asked pulling a chart from the emergency cabinet and starting to write down the time and date of the incident.

“Goddamned fags!” the injured vice cop muttered, still looking down at the floor.

“Hmmm?”

“That’s what I was doin’. You know how it works,” he said, looking at me angrily.

“No, I don’t. I’m not gifted with E.S.P. Now, if you want disability payments from the city, you’re going to have to tell me what happened in detail,” I said. I knew flashing the threat of no disability in front of his face would open him up.

“We work as a team. Joe here walks in the john and looks around for fags. They really turn on to him,” the injured officer said, nodding in the direction of his grinning partner.

“He should try women,” I commented, jotting down what I thought was important and ignoring a very hot, glaring stare from Joe.

“We work like a team,” he repeated himself. “While he’s down there in the john, I’m usually up in the false ceiling lookin’ down. I’ve got this here pocket camera,” the officer said, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out a long cylinder and showing it to me.

“Interesting,” I said, unimpressed. I was well aware of the tactics used by the vice division of L.A.P.D. While I wasn’t a marcher for Gay Lib, I attended enough gay gatherings—official and unofficial—to learn of their tricky ways.

“I was takin’ pictures today through a vent of these two fags gettin’ blow jobs through those glory holes,” the officer continued.

“And where were you, teammate?” I asked, glancing up at Joe.

“Stepped out. I can’t stand being there with all those fags for too long. I was going to go back in when I heard him shout.”

“I see,” I said calmly.

“That damned pipe I was on gave way just as I was takin’ some good shots.”

“I’m sure they were.”

“What?”

“Good shots,” I said, looking out the rear window and seeing we were getting close to Central Receiving. “You know, something you can slip in the family album and show Aunt Martha when she comes over.”

“Listen...” Joe started to say, obviously tired of my jibing.

“Look, I’m sorry.” I lied.

“You’ll be okay, fella,” Paul shouted from the front seat as we pulled into the rear drive of the hospital and up to the emergency entrance. Two attendants ran out to the ambulance and wrenched the rear doors open. They looked as startled by the patients as the patients were by them. This was the first emergency in days to come to Central Receiving, and certainly the first dual one in months. Sometimes I felt I was working at Tam.

“Careful with her,” I said to the first attendant as I handed the little girl out to him. “This one’ll live,” I said drily, nodding toward the vice officer.

The second attendant, Paul, me, and the partner helped slide him to the rear of the ambulance. As I moved around to one side to help push him gently out, my right heel

crunched down on the cylindrical miniature camera that had fallen to the floor.

“Jesus!” the injured officer said, turning around and looking at the pieces of black plastic that lay scattered on the floor. A tiny strip of grey film was coiled next to my right toe. I picked it up and handed it to him. “You just fucked up a day’s work,” he said, reaching out and hitting my hand in frustration.

I didn’t say anything, shrugging my shoulders and following him out.

“The next time you come up to the department, I’m going to kick you down the stairs,” I said to Paul as we walked into the hospital. On my way to the stairs that led up to the therapy room, I noticed it was eleven o’clock. A day wasted with Paul Thatcher and a pack of screaming emergencies! The only thing making it worthwhile was that breathing little girl and the groaning vice cop now being wheeled into X-ray.

“I’ll drop the report off this afternoon,” Paul said, heading for the candy vending machine in the cafeteria with a quarter in his right hand.

I climbed the stairs quickly, sure Greig would be waiting for me with a loaded pistol. He’d expected me to be gone for just a few

minutes. When I reached the top landing and ran into the room I saw him leaning against the front edge of his desk panting heavily. Five firemen sat in chairs in a makeshift lobby just in front of the first therapy table patiently reading sections of the Times while other fire and policemen occupied all the tables and whirlpools. I groaned inwardly as I looked again at Greig. A long-greying blond strand of hair hung in his eyes as he inhaled long and deep and glared at me.

“Where the FUCK have you been?”

“It’s a long story, believe me,” I said, reaching over and picking up my smock. While I helped Greig treat the patients I told him the whole story—Paul’s wild entry into MacArthur Park, my running out of the van and vomiting, our ultimate rescue of the little girl, and of course the highlight of the morning, the story of the vice cop in the toilet bowl.

That last incident pricked up many ears in the therapy room. While the public legend has it that all policemen stick together, the actual truth is that it ain’t necessarily so. The different departments are actually attached or separated by shifting loyalties. The public facade is one, of course, of unity. But in actuality the L.A.P.D. is fractured with

hundreds of feudal kingdoms tied loosely together by a vague oath of allegiance to Parker Center and its grand kahunas on the twelfth floor.

Among all these tiny municipal principalities are two that win both the fear and contempt of all the others. The first is Internal Affairs, a division responsible for policing the private and professional lives of all officers. The other is vice division. I suppose it's natural for men and women to shun those who specialize in analyzing the underbelly of society. We wonder what makes them so anxious to the point of being psychopathic about moral "problems" most of us shrug off or look the other way at.

The rest of the police department was no different. Other officers often wondered about their brothers who worked vice. Stories went around freely about how many vice officers sampled more than occasionally what they were supposed to be stamping out. Of course, investigations revealed nothing. But there was always a strong suspicion of corruption in the vice division lurking in the heads of police officers.

The story I related to Greig fed the natural prejudices of the police in the room. And when I got to the point about banging

the injured officer's knee against the door frame of the stall, they howled with delight.

Greig was getting ready to make some comment when we heard the elevator doors sliding open. I groaned inwardly, thinking of another army of patients flooding us so soon before lunch time.

"That's him!" I cried out over the back of an elderly motor cop.

"What?" Greig said, turning around and looking at two husky men in Levi's standing sheepishly at the main doorway.

"The two vice cops I told you about," I blurted out.

The other policemen craned their necks and looked curiously at the two blushing men. There were no guffaws as there were earlier. But a definite sniggering could be heard as Joe and his partner surveyed the long, narrow room.

"So it's not broken, eh?" I said, wiping my hands on my smock as I walked up to the injured officer and took a long, rectangular white card from his free hand. His right was wrapped around the wooden handle of a cane he used to support himself.

"One knee's kinds okay. The other's killin' me," he said, wincing as he hobbled closer.

“Careful, Jack,” one of the sitting firemen said as I walked toward the whirlpool room. “Better check the ceiling before you put the lid down to take a shit.”

The sniggering grew louder as the injured vice cop hobbled behind me. From the card I could tell he’d be seeing us for a long time. I hoped he was able to take the ribbing I knew he was going to get.

“Tom Bradford, right?” I said, moving the tall seat that fit over the front edge of the large whirlpool tank as the three of us walked into the tiny room.

“Right. I’ll get in myself,” he said sullenly. Frankly, I couldn’t blame him for his attitude. I left the two of them sulking as I moved back to the main room and started finishing up the patients. It was lunch time, and a very empty stomach was flashing emergency signals.



“Ninety-eight!” Greig said, leaning against the sill of one of the windows and peering at a thermometer bolted to the outside frame.

I raised my eyebrows and shrugged as I pulled the wet linen off the first therapy

table. We'd just finished with the last patient scheduled for the day. It was three o'clock, time for Ed to come in. I was feeling nervous. For some reason I wanted to get Greig out of the department for the rest of the day.

"Why don't you take off early?"

It wasn't an unusual suggestion. I'd finished up many days by myself while Greig left an hour or so before quitting time. He was married, three children (three of which did all they could to drive him and his wife shrieking into an asylum), and lived in a mortgaged, far-from-dream cottage in Covina. God only knows why he and his wife chose one of the most smog-bound communities in Los Angeles. Besides having the joy of sucking in an ounce of soot with every three of air, Greig enjoyed an hour and a half drive over bumper-to-bumper freeways to his door from the hospital. As a result of all these woes, Greig was more than overjoyed when I offered to finish up the day for him. I'd been working at the hospital long enough to know the routine and know what was required to close.

"Sure you don't mind?"

Greig was standing by the doorway of the whirlpool room already untying his white

smock and slipping it off his shoulders. His face brightened like a newly lit bulb.

“Go ahead. It’ll give me a chance to catch up on some schoolwork. I’ve got a lab tomorrow night,” I said, nodding toward a stack of biochem books I always kept in the therapy room. Greig was good enough to let me study at work when the load was slow.

“You’ve got a deal,” he said, tossing the wrinkled smock into the hamper and grabbing his green sweater off the coat rack by the door.

He was right I had a deal. I was mentally sharpening my claws, waiting for Ed to walk through those doors. I didn’t have any particular plan. It was foolish to think of one if he turned out to be straight.

I groaned out loud as that thought dragged itself heavily across my mind. For the first time since I’d met the policeman, I realized I was embarked on a serious voyage of confrontation whose end might turn out to be unpleasant. I glanced nervously at the clock then rubbed my fingers rapidly over my forearms. They were getting stiff and numb with excitement.

Maybe I wouldn’t try anything today, no matter how horny I was. After all, I was tired. And if Ed turned out to be hetero...

My resolve to make the first move today faded as quickly as it came into focus earlier. I decided I'd rather live with the possibility than cozy up to inalterable reality. When most of us come across a serious challenge, there's really a certain comfort in letting it pass and losing a possible grand reward. True, we might have tried and won. Those who know themselves so well they are cognizant of their strengths and weaknesses do so and lead happy, fulfilled lives. They are the saints and devils of the world. But for those of us trapped in the middle whose self-image is often more muddled than a hot bowl of oatmeal, the idea of trying and failing at something we deem important is terrifying. That failure would be a terrible judgement on some aspect of our personality we treasure.

"If I'd only tried, I KNOW I could have done it." How many people repeat that phrase how many times a day and get some solace out of it. Of course it's cheap and cowardly. But then again, how many of us are saintly enough to brave to challenge?

Three-fifteen anyway, I thought to myself, glancing at the overhead clock for the last time. I sighed, figuring Ed wouldn't come. It wasn't too unusual. After all, a cop

doesn't have a rigorous schedule he must keep. I picked up one of my textbooks and walked over to Greig's desk, pulling out his wooden swivel chair and sitting down. I turned to the chapter on invert sugars as I squeaked back and forth on the comfortable piece of furniture. As I was starting to fathom the mysteries of the carbon chain on the page, I heard the elevator door slide open. Glancing up from the book, I saw Ed stepping out of the car and grinning sheepishly at me. I did all I could to keep from dropping the book.

"Sorry I'm late, but I had to give out a ticket to a speeder," he said, reaching down with both hands and unbuckling his thick black leather belt and holster. Hanging it up on the rack he unbuttoned his dark blue woolen shirt, shrugging it off and making some groaning sounds as he flexed his muscles on his arms, then rubbed his shoulders. Now I know how the wolf felt when Red Riding Hood came for dinner.

"You'll have to put up with me," I said, closing the text book and standing up slowly as that blond hunk pulled off his sweat T-shirt and tossed it onto the leg exercise table. While he climbed onto the first therapy table,

I walked over to the first heater and pulled out one of the large hotpacks.

He's as straight as John Wayne, I thought to myself as I wrapped six towels around the steaming pack, then carried it over to Ed and laid it gently on his back.

"Where's Greig?"

"Had to go home. Don't worry, I'm trained," I said, laughing softly as I kept kicking myself mentally. How could I have thought that he was gay? I must have had a fit of the crazies when that idea floated across my mind. I went back to the table and sat down hard, picking up the book and opening it to the page I'd been studying. I tried to concentrate; but the contorted carbon chains pictured on the page seemed to snake around as if they were alive. I slammed the book shut and threw it across the desk in despair. I wished Greig were here now. At least I'd have someone to talk to—someone who'd help me get my mind off that rounded ass rising like two moons only inches away from me.

"The pain's a little lower this time around," Ed grunted into his pillow, reaching down to his waist with both hands and unzipping his fly. He pushed his pants and briefs down below his smooth, rounded

cheeks and signaled me to re-position the pack.

The testing of Abraham was child's play compared to what I was faced with as I got up and walked over to the therapy table.

"I'll take care of it."

Jesus! My voice sounded as low as Bankhead's as I grabbed the pack and slid it down Ed's sweaty back toward his rising ass. I thought I could see his sides contract when my fingers touched him. This just might be the minute I'd been waiting for. While I was pretending to adjust the pack I moved my hands slowly down his back until they were trailing along the big policeman's buttocks. He still lay quietly on the table, making no moves or sounds that might give him away. I could feel that hot, smooth, wet skin sliding under my callused fingers as my hands moved closer to the narrow asscrack.

Ed shifted his position slightly on the table suddenly, bending his right knee inward while he spread his legs as widely apart as his pushed-down pants would allow. I didn't know if this move was an open invitation to go farther, or simply a natural reaction to the new positioning of the pack.

Make up your mind, damn it! I screamed to myself as I felt my cock rising up in my

jockeys. It was pressing up against the bottom of the elastic waistband, beating against my belly and the tight-fitting cotton shorts as I felt the air burning in my lungs. It was as if I'd just swallowed four whiskeys and was suddenly faced with performing some greatly complex task. I tried to keep my senses and balance as I moved my fingers inward, sliding them along the inner slope of Ed's firm buttcheeks downward until I found myself fingering his scrotum.

I could get away with that move as an "accident". But the time for getting away with goodies was ending. There are certain moves in life that once made are irrevocable. They have a terrible finality about them that changes lives for better or worse. I felt myself trapped in one of those moments. Ed didn't move a muscle. Suddenly it occurred to me he might be waiting for me to make the first move. He was too quiet—quiet to the point of being tense and expectant.

I sucked in a deep breath, then pushed my fingers down until they slid under the big blond's scrotum and touched his balls.

I controlled myself as best I could, knowing the game was up now. Even if he started lurching off the table, I was going to grab a fistful of cockmeat before I had to

contend with a screaming cop. What a surprise I got when I found eight inches of stiff prickmeat throbbing out of Ed's groin instead of a few inches of soft dickfluff.

"Oh Ed," I groaned out involuntarily, not exactly sure what to do now. He had a hard-on, obviously because of my fingering. Great! But even if both of us felt the same toward one another, there was still the inescapable fact that we were in the Physical Therapy Department of a public hospital. That wasn't the greatest place for making love and getting your rocks off.

Ed finally stirred, pushing his handsome blond head off the indented pillow and turning it around until I found myself staring into his sparkling blue eyes. There was a firm intent look on his face now. The lines in his face were set deep and his jaw was clenched in determination. His flesh was flushed with excitement and tiny beads of sweat stood like unlit lamps across his forehead. I felt I should say something—he should say something—but I couldn't find words that would fit the occasion. Hallmark, where were you when I needed you?

"I've wanted something like-this to happen for a long time," Ed said. Not the greatest line ever written, but one that went

straight to my heart. With that declaration, he turned completely around on the table, sending the hotpack splattering down on the floor. When he rolled around on his ass, his big cock swung out and up in the air, finally resting end up on his belly as the blond cop propped himself on his arms and looked at me. I was still standing at the front right side of the therapy table, gripping the edge so tightly my knuckles were white. I felt Ed's eyes boring into my head, burning down into my brain as I gasped for air like a suffocating animal. Neither of us made a move for what seemed like a millennium but was probably more like several seconds. I'm not a romantic, sentimental person. In fact I'd often been called coldly cynical and unfeeling. In part this was true. I believed most men and women made unsatisfactory circus clowns of themselves when they mooned ridiculously about "in love." Now that I found myself in the situation I'd so often ridiculed, I apologized profoundly and silently to all those people who were now my brothers and sisters in spirit. In other words I was acting like a bigger circus clown than any of them probably had, and was enjoying every damned second of it.

“Where?” I was finally able to get out of my mouth. It was so hot and dry I could hardly open it, let alone speak well.

“What about here?” Ed asked, his grim face breaking into a soft smile.

“Here? Anybody could walk in,” I said, trying to keep my heart down in the vicinity of the rib cage. I just needed a little more coaxing to close the doors and lock them. I was already thinking of excuses for anyone who tried to contact the department and found no one there. Of course there’d be the problem of finding my car out in the parking lot and not finding me in the room. But I could always say I felt ill and decided to sleep it off until quitting time.

“I’ll fix that,” I said, tearing myself away from Ed’s burning eyes and moving quickly across the shining tiled floor. I was answering my own questions already. Funny how lust can make a fool out of you in seconds. I pushed the main door shut, flipping the lock then reaching up and turning off the overhead fluorescent lights. I leaned against that cool, green-plastered wall, adjusting my eyes to the dimmed light as I wiped my sweating palms over my white smock. Ed was sitting up all the way now, reaching down to his knees and pushing off his shorts and

dark blue uniform pants. In an instant the big blond was naked, his body glistening in the late afternoon sunlight that streamed in through the small window directly above his therapy table. He didn't say a word; but his eyes sent out loud signals, broadcasting how much he wanted me now.

With that, the phone rang.

"Shit!" I cried out. The jangling cut through my mind like the blade of a rusty saw. It shattered the thick air between Ed and me and sent it clattering to the hard floor like shards of broken glass.

I clenched my fingers into two tight fists, closing my eyes and praying God that whoever was calling would drop suddenly of a coronary. No luck. The bell seemed to ring louder and louder. I had to answer it.

"Hey, Jack. It's Paul!"

Of all people he had to call. I'd managed to get rid of him when he visited us earlier that afternoon. Now I remembered I'd forgotten to sign that report he brought with him.

"The report," I groaned.

"Right. I'll be right up. I've got to get it signed by tonight."

"No, don't! Not now! Uh, how about four—quitting time. I'm really busy now."

Paul hemmed and hawed but finally agreed when I wouldn't compromise. I would have put off Armageddon for a chance to go to bed with Ed.

Chapter Four

There are times in life when what you've sought after for so long falls short of imagined pleasures you'd thought it would bring. It's a feeling common to the human race and can be seen in everything from vacations to entire careers. This was not one of those times.

Ed waited patiently for me on the therapy table while I untied my smock (conveniently the ties had been knotted so tightly I finally had to take a scissors and slice my way out of the uniform), ripped two buttons off my shirt as I took that off, then tried to slide my pants and shorts down over my boots—not the wisest thing I'd ever tried.

Finally stripping down and throwing my clothes into a heap on Greig's desk, I walked

slowly over to Ed. I watched his eyes as they drank in my body. Fine, I was busy lapping his. I could feel my dick jutting out and swaying lazily right to left with every step I took. A gentle, cool draft made my skin pucker up into gooseflesh as I neared Ed and the table.

“Come on up. I promise I won’t throw you off,” Ed said, spreading his legs wider apart as he lay his head back down on the pillow. His big hands were resting quietly across his heaving chest, his fingers lightly toying with the frazzled blond body hairs covering his chest like a welcome mat. His small brown nipples were erect. His cock still lay across his flat stomach, his sensitive underside twitching and throbbing as a small opaque drop of cum slowly oozed up out of the piss-slit.

I stopped thinking about the table almost instantly. It was if someone else were pushing me across the floor and up to the top. I literally spilled onto Ed, landing on top of him with one quick leap.

What followed was like a dream-sequence in one of Bergman’s raunchier flicks. I heard Ed moaning as I lowered my head and kissed him. My mouth glued itself down onto his while our cocks pressed hard against one

another and rubbed teasingly back and forth. My head buzzed and burned as I nearly choked on Ed's flowing spittle. Our tongues flayed against one another, poking, probing, battling each other as the room was filled with loud, wet sucking sounds. I was sliding across the big cop's belly on a thick layer of sweat. My hands roamed freely over Ed's twisting body, caressing his firm hard thighs, then moving up to his chest and pinching his tits, finally sliding down between our hot wet bellies and touching that wonderful silky, hot, drooling cockhead.

From his reaction to all of this I could tell Ed hadn't been to bed with anyone for a long time. His eyes were shut tight while his breathing was short and raspy. He kept making choking, high-pitched guttural sounds deep in his throat like an animal whose leg has been caught in some sharktoothed trap. His head rolled back and forth across the pillow and his legs trembled. I thought he was going to cum—to spill over onto me without really doing anything. As flattering as that might sound, I wasn't looking forward to that kind of quick reaction. I was desperate for the big cop. But I wanted to enjoy myself on the trip as well as at the ultimate destination.

I pulled away from Ed, pushing my head back as far as it would go to look at the big man. He lay quietly under me, breathing hard as he ran his big hands lovingly up and down my sides. Then Ed pulled my head down again and we kissed long and hard. It deepened as our hands explored one another more slowly and less frantically. We found new places of mutual excitement with each passing minute. As the narrow table groaned under our heavy weight, I found myself almost overwhelmed by Ed's physical size. His heavy shoulders, big arms, deep chest, great columns of legs, and that long, thick cock with the big blue vein running the full length attacked my mind in a blizzard of sensuality. I suddenly felt a wave of possession sweep over me. I wanted all that to be mine. I'd waited so long for it I felt it already was.

We moved well together, anticipating the other's move with corresponding shifts, hunches and thrusts as our mouths drank deeper and deeper into one another's. I wrapped my hands around Ed's big rounded shoulders and slid my body easily up over his, spreading my legs and letting the full length of my cock slide over his. I moved up and down in short quick jerks, gasping as I felt

my leathery balls bumping across Ed's fat nuts. His stiff blond cock hairs tickled my groin as I kept sliding further up the therapy table. Soon I was pressing down on my knees, raising myself up and leaning against the wall as I pushed my stiff dick down at Ed's mouth.

"I've never done that before," he said hesitatingly.

I wasn't about to argue the point. I wanted to feel his lips wrapped around the hot sides of my dick. I didn't care if he was the world's greatest cocksucker or not. There just seemed to be something important about having him take my prick in his mouth. Call it a kind of communion or spiritual union, or any of the other crazy and meaningless terms sexologists use to describe an indescribably satisfying act. I just wanted him to suck my cock.

"Please," I urged.

Ed sighed, then raised his head up slightly from the pillow and opened his mouth. I closed my eyes, feeling my throat tighten up and grow drier as it threatened to crack open from the pressure. There was a hot wetness suddenly around my prick, accompanied by a slight vacuum. I leaned forward more, driving my cock into Ed's

mouth deeper as my head pressed against the opened venetian blinds. I could feel the cold metal blades cutting slightly into my forehead as I leaned forward even more. Opening my eyes, I could see the city of Los Angeles below me, gearing up for the big five o'clock rush hour. It just seemed so absurd, all those people walking and driving around dispassionately, unaware of the unspeakably lusty action going on almost over their heads. I wanted to scream out at them in profound happiness, telling them how wonderful and full I felt.

Of course it was absurd. I pushed myself back until I was kneeling upright. Looking down, I watched Ed's head bob back and forth as he swung on my prick. The tight, hot skin glistened with a thin layer of the big cop's spit.

"Eddy, Eddy," I moaned, moving my ass back and sliding my cock out of his mouth. He fell back, gasping for breath as he closed his eyes and moaned out something unintelligible.

Tit for tat, I thought to myself, edging carefully down the table until I found my mouth directly above his reddish-purplish bulbous cockhead. He didn't even know what hit him. Taking his dick gently in the fingers

of my right hand, I pried it up until it was sticking out from his groin like a throbbing barber pole. I lowered my head and opened my mouth, swallowing half the dick's length before I clamped my lips tightly around that rod and started sucking at it with all my might. At the same time I fluttered and swirled my tongue around the underside and head, reaching down with my right hand and scratching his balls with my thumb while I caressed the unswallowed portion of Ed's prick with my forefinger.

I'd heard dogs yelp when you stepped on their paws. But there were few times when I'd heard a human make the same sound. This was one of them. I thought someone had let in a pack of German shepherds as I continued to work on Ed's cock and balls. His body shuddered a good nine points on the Richter scale. Ed's legs trembled, then shot apart as he clenched his asscheeks together and pushed up with all his might. I raised my head with that thrust, knowing full well he wanted me to swallow all his dick. I preferred to tease.

I couldn't last much longer, and I knew damned well Ed was on the brink. All this foreplay was wonderful. But there comes a time to store the foreplay and get down to

business. Besides, Paul was going to come up soon. I hated to have sex on a timetable. But this couldn't be avoided. I'd rather take Ed now than wind up on the brink over him with Paul Thatcher pounding on the door.

"I want you to fuck me," I said softly after I'd released Ed's cock.

He looked at me gasping. His blue eyes burned with the intensity of a compressed gas jet. There wasn't any need for him to answer that question. Sitting up, he reached forward and wrapped his big arms around me. We moved about the table carefully, me sliding under him as he rolled over me.

"The K-Y. In the drawer," I gasped out, rolling my head to the right and looking at a small therapy table to my right.

Ed reached over and opened the top drawer, fumbling around for several seconds until he found the tube. At the same time I pulled my knees up and out, tilting my ass up slightly as I felt the hot, slick wetness of Ed's rod throbbing against my asscrack. He squeezed the tube into his hand and stroked it onto his blood-heavy prick. Laying the opened tube back on the table, Ed leaned forward and placed his hands against my armpits. I could feel that big hot prickhead pressing against my tight shitter.

Relax, relax, I kept telling myself. With something that big swinging between his legs I knew he'd split my ass apart before he got his rocks off if I couldn't relax.

As Ed moved into position he backed up onto his knees and reached down for his prick to guide it into me.

"Just a little at first," I suggested as I felt him screwing his cockhead into my bowels. At first I was going to close my eyes and grit my teeth to fight the pain. Then I decided it'd be more exciting to watch Ed's face as he sank his cock deeper and deeper into my ass.

It was mind-blowing! His mouth was half-opened while his eyes burned with wild, animal excitement. I could see his body wracked with great shudders as his head made its first penetration. He stopped just as the head slipped in between my asshole lips, then started forcing the rest of the rod in on a long, slow entrance.

I tilted my ass up more to help him, trying to ignore the splitting pain that telegraphed itself to my cock and made it go limp. Ed muttered a groan of pleasure as he pressed forward harder.

"Does it hurt?" he grunted out.

"It hurts. But keep on going," I answered him in a strained voice. I was seeing white

flashes and a kaleidoscope of colors in front of me. But I was in no mood for him to pull out and start over again.

To my surprise I found myself whimpering and letting out short, sharp strangled sobs as Ed lowered himself onto me. My ass and thigh muscles worked hungrily as they tried to swallow the big blond cop's dick faster than he was pushing it in. As his chest sank to mine, I could feel Ed's balls start to rest against my upturned buttocks. At the same time the pain was slowly going away. It was replaced by a strange hot, tight feeling rippling across my stretched shit-chute. Like the pain had before, this sensation telegraphed itself to my limp dick. In a second I could feel the blood rushing back into that wonderful organ, making it stiff and hot once again.

"Jesus," Ed grunted out as he threw the last inch of cockmeat into me. Our bodies rested together, panting heavily and sweating profusely as I could feel Ed's dick throbbing in my ass.

"Oh, God, Eddy, fuck me" I repeated, reaching up and taking his head in my hands. I raised it and looked into his eyes. His blond hair was plastered with sweat against his forehead. He opened his mouth as he tried to

say something. I stopped that by pulling him down and locking his mouth to mine.

The two of us groaned together, he pressing down his powerful body and me shoving up as he slid across one another in opposite directions. My hips worked wildly as Ed drew his cock out slightly, then slid it back in and accented the move with a long, shuddering groan.

We continued that way for God-only-knows how long. Ed adopted his own rhythm, submerging me in his powerful will and lust as he seemed to be driving deeper into me. I hunched up hard, slapping my ass against the root of his dick and his swinging balls as his flat belly rubbed my cock up to firing. The tiny hairs on his stomach tickled the base of my dickhead until I could feel it screwing down for a big, first cum-spatter.

Finally Ed pulled back and let out a loud shout of agonized pleasure. I saw the veins standing out in his forehead and cords straining in his neck as he gave a long, brutal shove forward. That kind of sight and sensation was too much for me. I matched his cry with one of my own, burying my head in his right shoulder as I felt the itchy achy feeling wracking my dick suddenly relieved by the first shot of cum.

We dissolved into one another, becoming a mass of tangled arms and legs as we both shot our loads. I could feel Ed's fat dickmeat wriggling and jerking inside me. That sensation drove me wild. I squeezed my buttcheeks together, milking his dick for more jizz. Ed responded by moving his ass in tiny circles, churning his cock like a stick inside my body while he reached between our bellies and jerked my cock up and down between his fingers.

Finally we finished, remaining still and suspended in a mindless stupor of feeling complete and relaxed. Slowly I got back my breath and was able to speak.

"You know how long I've been waiting for something like this to happen?" I said, running my fingers lightly back and forth across Ed's sloping shoulders.

"Probably about as long as I have."

"You mean...?"

"Hell, Jack. I thought you could read all the signals. I practically sent you notes about what I wanted to do. I thought you were straight." Ed said, shaking his head slowly back and forth as he smiled broadly at me.

"I thought the same thing," I answered him, feeling strangely stupid and isolated suddenly. I couldn't believe he'd been

communicating that message to me so long and. I'd been that obtuse not to notice it.

"In any case, I'm glad we finally were able to get through to each other," Ed said, bending down and kissing me lightly on the lips. I slid my arms up and around his neck, pulling him down again and thrusting my tongue between his lips. We held that long kiss for minutes, drinking in the warm glow spreading over our bodies.

"Have you done it with a lot of other guys?" I asked him as we pulled apart.

"That's a stupid question," he said, still smiling at me. But there was a note of irritation in his voice. "Why do you want to know?"

"Just curious. I mean, you felt as if you hadn't been to bed in weeks," I said, running the fingers of my right hand gently through his hair. It felt hot, wet and silky to the touch.

"Well, it depends on just what you mean by a lot. I've had my share. But I've got to be careful," Ed said, his smile slowly fading into a frown. "I'm a cop, Jack. I can't take any chances. I get caught and my career, my pension—everything—goes down the tubes."

I thought about this a second, then felt a flood of sympathy for Ed. No matter what

happened to me concerning disclosure I could pick up the pieces and start my life over again easily. I had no established career yet. I didn't particularly worry about public censure or work dismissal. But for Ed, his career was on the line. It was like being in a mental prison.

"Why don't you quit? I mean, you can't keep doing this, Ed, and expect to get away with it for long. I mean, somebody's going to find out sooner or later."

"Let's not talk about that now," he said, pushing himself off me until he was upright on his knees. I saw him growing distant quickly, and I regretted ever having started this conversation. I wanted to be with Ed again. I wracked my brain trying to think of something to say to break through the barrier I'd just erected.

"Are you going off duty now?" I asked as Ed started to slide off the table. I was losing him fast.

"I've got another two hours to go," Ed mumbled, walking quickly across the floor and grabbing one of the towels Greig and I kept stacked next to the hotpack heaters.

"Want to have some dinner together?"

I knew it was forward, but I couldn't help myself. I'd always been the one in cool

control of the situation. Now I found it running away from me and there was little I could do to stop it.

“I don’t think so, Jack. I promised Bill I’d go bar-hopping with him tonight.”

Bill Harrington was Jack’s roommate, a self-styled swinger who cruised Marina Del Rey’s singles bars for hot pussy. After what had just taken place between me and Ed, I found it hard to believe he’d be interested snuffing out cunt.

“He’s old enough to pick up his own tricks,” I commented drily as I got up and slid off the table. The wet sheet covering the top stuck to my ass ridiculously as I started to walk to the desk to grab my clothes.

“I know. Let’s just cool it for a while, okay?” Ed wasn’t even looking at me as he slid his crumpled shorts up his legs.

Cool as an iceberg, I thought to myself as I dressed quickly. The situation was as obvious as it could be. Ed was one of those men struggling with his homosexuality, swinging back and forth between men and women like a pendulum. I’d read about these people and they bored me. I never could stand situations that remained unresolved for any period of time. I couldn’t understand how people could waver between such

opposite poles for so long, especially when this question concerned not only their sexual identity by their psychological one as well. I considered them silly and overly sentimental, not worth the trouble thinking about let alone trifling with. It was unsettling to think that I was now becoming involved in a problem I'd always despised.

"Whatever you want," I said wearily, buttoning up what was left of my shirt, then sitting down and slipping on my socks and boots. I swore I wasn't going to play Ed's game until he came around to me. I wasn't going to toss and turn at night, wondering where the hell he was and who he was with while he didn't care one bit for me.

Then I started wondering just what he was going to try to pick up tonight with Bill.

"Hey, you're not going to tell anyone about this, are you?" he asked in a tight voice as he finished buckling on his holster.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Ed," I said angrily, turning away from him and waving my hand angrily above my head in a gesture for him to get out. That final question was about to drive me into a rage.

"Look, I'm sorry..." he started to say. I heard the elevator door sliding open outside

the door and motioned for Ed to unlock the door.

He'd just finished that when the door swung open and Paul Thatcher strode in.

"Hi, guys," he said, walking briskly over to my desk and throwing the report in front of me. I glanced at it, then turned my head around and looked at the fat paramedic. I couldn't understand how someone who hadn't slept for the past fourteen hours could be so spry. I was about to collapse in front of him. "You're supposed to read it, then sign under my name on the second page."

I picked up the report and started forcing my eyes to move from left to right. Occasionally I glanced up and noticed Ed pretending to straighten his uniform in the full-length mirror a few feet to the right of my desk. I had the feeling he wanted to say something more to me and was waiting for Paul to leave. For some reason I felt incredibly cold and brittle toward him at the moment. I purposely took my time in reading the first page, turning around and asking Paul ridiculous questions about the events of the morning while Ed was running out of things to do in front of that mirror.

"Guess I'll be going," he said, obviously exasperated by my studied indifference. As

much as I wanted to talk with him alone, I wanted him out of there as badly.

“Tomorrow at the same time?” I asked as he turned around and flashed me a mixed look of hostility and yearning. I almost signed the report and threw Paul out the door. But I decided to bide my time.

“Sure. Why not?” he said, shrugging his shoulders, then turning around and walking slowly out the door. I wanted to shout out for him to wait. Instead I looked back down at the report and slipped the first page under the second.

“It looks okay,” I mumbled, signing under Paul’s scribble, then handing the pages back to the attendant.

“That sniper’s going around town again,” he said, folding the report three times and tucking it into his shirt pocket.

“Oh?” Ed said, walking back into the room after he’d pressed the down button for the elevator. I couldn’t tell if he was capitalizing on Paul’s comment as an excuse to hang on, or if he was really interested.

“I’m surprised you haven’t heard about it. It’s been on all the radios,” the paramedic said, folding his fat arms across his belly and leaning against the side of the desk. I could have killed them both. I wanted to be alone;

to sort out the jumbled emotions that were rioting inside my head.

“I’ve been up here for a while,” Ed said, glancing briefly at me before he turned away and looked back at Paul.

“Yeah. He tried to gun down a couple cops over at Parker Center a few minutes ago. Almost got ‘em, too,” Paul said.

“Parker Center! That’s just down the street,” I said feeling a cold rush of excitement shoot up and down my back. The sniper had usually operated far enough away from me for him to be nothing more than a weird newspaper story. Now that he was lurking around only a few blocks away, I began to feel real terror.

The three of us fell silent, looking dumbly at one another for several seconds. Then our eyes shifted in unison to the row of three windows on the outside wall that faced onto Sixth Street. There were several tall building on the opposite side of the avenue, any one of which could be housing that madman now. The thought that Central Receiving would be a prime target for him flashed through my mind and obviously through Paul’s and Ed’s at the same time.

I turned away from the windows, trying to tell myself how silly I was. Glancing up at

the clock, I saw it was three-forty-five. No one would mind me quitting fifteen minutes earlier.

“I’m going to lock up shop,” I said, pushing the chair back from the desk. At the same time the elevator door slid open. As I stood up, Ed waked into the car without saying another word.

“I’ll walk down with you,” Paul said as I walked to the bathroom to take a piss before leaving. Considering the sudden news of the sniper’s nearby activity, I welcomed Paul’s suggestion.

Chapter Five

“**Y**ou’re not going YET? It’s fifteen minutes before quitting time! You’re not supposed to get out of here ’til four o’clock!”

The words came from the mouth of a fat, puffing woman in a blue-yellow-and-white print dress. She’d struggled up the stairs (God only knows why—the elevator was certainly working) with a white treatment card in her right hand. Her hair was a dark brown heavily streaked with grey and hung carelessly about her face and shoulders. Red and purple crawling across yellowish snow. Her eyes bulged out of their sockets probably because of her long climb up the stairs. She looked wildly unkempt.

“There’s a sniper loose in the neighborhood,” I said calmly, stepping back and looking more closely at this apparition of human fat. Her breasts were enormous, bulging out the top of her ill-fitting dress. Along her sides I could see the rolls of flab pressing against the material, looking like a still photograph of the Pacific during a thunderstorm. The hem of her dress was higher in the back than the front, due obviously to the thunderously large, rounded buttocks that curved out from her lower back.

What was the most ridiculous were her tiny, thin ankles supporting this enormous bulk of womanhood. They looked as if they belonged to a little girl. I was amazed at how well they stood up against what must have been a tremendous amount of pressure.

“I don’t care,” she insisted, her face flushing red with anger as well as with exertion. “I’m a civil servant. I work hard for my money, I’m entitled to treatment just like everyone else.”

She waved the treatment card in front of my nose like a battle banner. I sighed and reached forward, pulling the card out of her hand and looking at the treatment prescribed by the doctors below.

“Dr. Morrison said you’ve got some kind of table up here that’ll take care of my back and legs,” she said huffily.

“Most witch doctors in Kenya know more about modern medicine than Dr. Morrison,” I muttered under my breath as I examined the card more carefully. It was true. He had prescribed what Greig and I called “the rack” for her.

“Better go on ahead, Paul,” I said, motioning with my head for the woman to follow me in. “I’m going to be awhile with her,” I muttered as I unlocked the door and reached to the right, flipping on the light switch. “Take off your dress and lay down on that table in there,” I said, pointing to the brown leather treatment table in the tiny treatment room to the right of the main doorway.

“I tell you I’m a civil servant, and I demand respect. Too many people like you take advantage of people like me. I just as good...” and on and on until I wanted to stick her head in one of the full whirlpool tanks and leave it there until morning. My only comfort in this was I knew the stretching and tugging of the machine would be initially painful.

As she undressed in the room I chuckled to myself, feeling more and more like a twentieth century Marquis de Sade.

“What’s taking you so long? I’m ready. I haven’t got all day,” she cackled through the closed door. “I’ll wait, buddy. She’s too good to be real,” Paul said, smirking as he walked to one of the chairs near the desk and sat down.

“Just relax while I put these straps around you,” I said, sliding a leather harness around her thunderous, flabby asscheeks, bringing it around her thighs and finally joining two opened ends together just below her belly. Her mouth moved a mile a minute, spitting out one complaint after another as I buckled two leg straps to her remarkably thin ankles. “Raise your head up, will you?” I asked mechanically as I grabbed the neck harness and slipped it under her head. Once put in place, the strap would shut her up for the duration of the treatment.

“I’m just as good as annnybbbddyymgghh,” she ended up slurring as I slipped the chin piece in place, buckling it to the head strap and attaching the entire assembly to one lever of the machine.

“This may hurt for a while, but it’s what the doctor ordered. Here’s a magazine for you to read,” I said, handing her a copy of *Sports Illustrated* while I flipped on the switch and set the timer for twenty minutes.

I was always amazed at how that table worked. It seemed to have countless moving parts that vibrated, twisted, rolled and pitched independently of one another. The center of the table pushed up and tilted to the right as two levers at the foot and head of the rack moved back. The fat lady—known to me later as Bertha Kopinsky—was stretched and pushed like a Protestant sinner at the hands of the Inquisition. Her belly rose like a full moon as the center of the table peaked while her ankles and neck moved forward and backward respectively at an alarming speed. She let out a muffled scream of agony (thank God for the chin strap!) and dropped the *Sports Illustrated* to the floor. Her hands shot up to her head as she tried to relieve the tremendous pressure on her neck.

“Now, now,” I said condescendingly, “we mustn’t do anything against what doctor ordered.”

Her eyes rolled to one side and flashed a look of incredible hatred at me as I picked

up the magazine and rested it gently across her heaving chest. The machine clattered and rattled merrily away as I walked out of the treatment room and closed the door half-shut behind me.

“That’s the first time I’ve ever seen that thing used,” Paul said in a low whisper as he craned his neck around the doorway and peered into the treatment room. The big table was tilting in unison to the left now, looking like a giant ship with a cargo of white cotton stacked to the bridge lolling in heavy seas.

I mumbled something meaningless to him, finishing writing Bertha’s name in the appointment book and dating her treatment card. In a way I was grateful for the complaining woman—and even for Paul’s staying in the room. They kept my mind off something very painful and irritating for a while. I knew I’d have to face myself sooner or later and the problem of Ed Jacobsen. Right now I was thankful for the respite.

“You think they’ll ever catch that guy?” Paul asked after several minutes had passed in silence. I could hear Bertha’s muffled shrieks turning gradually into groans of resignation.

“What guy?”

“The sniper. He’s really tearin’ up the city,” the fat paramedic said, crossing his right leg over his left and leaning back in the chair. I could see Paul was in a mood to talk. There was rarely a time when he wasn’t. As grateful as I was for his presence at the moment, I didn’t feel like chatting.

“I don’t know Paul. I’d better go check on her,” I said, glancing up at the clock and noting it was four. There were still five minutes to go on the table before the timer went out. Then there’d be fifteen minutes more of hotpack therapy, followed by five of ultrasonic massage and five of regular massage. I wasn’t particularly looking forward to staying all that time enjoying Bertha’s enlightening conversation. I planned on shortening the therapy times without arousing the suspicion of that woman. She was bright and observant. But she was also in pain. People in that condition could often be fooled as to time passage. I was counting on it.

I’d just pushed back my chair and started to get up when the room was filled with a loud, crashing sound. I looked curiously at Paul whose eyes suddenly widened in terror and surprise.

“What...?” I started to ask, looking down the full length of the room. Everything looked normal at first. Then I noticed something glittering under the overhead lights on the third therapy table from me. I narrowed my eyes and realized it was shattered glass laying on the table and the floor in front of it. The window above the table had been [text is missing from the book - printing error in paperback edition]

I felt as if someone had poured concrete in my veins. One part of my mind knew exactly what was happening. The shattering windows and the loud, echoing report was enough evidence for that. The sniper had moved south from Parker Center and was now busily firing into the windows of the hospital.

I stood frozen in the middle of the floor, gaping open-mouthed at the jagged pieces of glass still clinging to the sides of the third window as the sounds of the therapy table and Bertha’s muffled groans continued as if nothing had happened.

“Get down,” I heard Paul hissing behind me. I turned around and saw he’d slid off the chair and had crawled under the desk.

“What?”

I still couldn't believe this was happening. Nothing traumatic had ever brushed against my life. I'd always believed disasters happened to other people, a belief all too commonly held by everyone, including those finding themselves suddenly embroiled in terrifying situations. It never occurred to me that appalling destruction lurked only millimeters away from my life, ready to flood in and ruin it forever.

"GET DOWN!" Paul shouted.

As if on cue, another bullet whistled through the opening of the third window, hissing just over my right ear and burying itself with a sickening thud in the wall behind me.

I dropped to the floor after that, sprawling in front of the hotpack heaters as more bullets rained into the therapy room. I heard the other windows shattering, feeling some splinters of the blown-away glass landing on the back of my neck and hands. The floor shimmered with broken glass.

"What are you doing?" Paul said as I swept a path in front of me clear from glass and started crawling toward the desk.

"Got to call the cops," I mumbled through my teeth. I forced my mind to remain cool even though I felt like getting up

and screeching in terror. I felt incredibly light as I slithered slowly across the polished floor. Extreme emotions do that to people, I guess. Earlier it had been the love and lust I felt for Ed. Now it was sheer animal terror pounding through my veins that made me feel like an air balloon.

“This place is loaded with ‘em. Somebody should hear what’s goin’ on,” Paul screamed at me as two more bullets dug themselves into the rear wall. I kept my head down, crawling closer to the desk. The phone sat on the right front corner of the top. Just as I reached the forward leg of the desk, I heard a sharp cracking sound above me followed by a loud clanging. Something sharp dug into the back of my left hand. It was a piece of black plastic.

“He’s shot the fuckin’ phone!” I shouted at the top of my lungs, feeling helplessly pinned down by that maniac. I looked up and saw half the receiver laying prone on the desk top, wires sprouting out of the shattered handle like the roots of an upturned tree. There was another crashing sound above me followed by popping explosions. A bullet had hit the overhead fluorescent light, cracking it open with a loud explosion and sending a rain of glass down

on top of me. There was shattered glass everywhere as the sniper kept peppering the therapy room with a hail of bullets.

“What about fatso in there?” Paul asked. He was only inches away from me now, still crouching protectively under the desk.

“Shit!” I said under my breath, glancing up and seeing that her timer was just about up. If she wandered out unknowingly to the main room she might stop a bullet. “She could never crawl out of that harness,” I said, thinking about the leather straps again.

More cracking sounds, this time coming from the half opened door leading into the smaller therapy room where Bertha the mouth was being stretched and compacted. The force of impact pushed the door open. My heart stopped as I thought of that fat woman. The rack was in direct line with the sniper’s gun. She could stop a bullet just lying there.

“I’ve got to get to her,” I said between my teeth as it slid back and started crawling to the opened doorway. Two more bullets slammed into the door, forcing it all the way open. I could see Bertha’s big white belly pitching and rolling like a bulky clipper ship in heavy seas. Her eyes were closed as the rack peaked, rocked, and moved around like

some unearthly torture machine. There was another hail of bullets, several of them crashing against the window just above Bertha's upturned toes. Most of the glass blew outward, fortunately for Bertha. Unfortunately for me she became all too aware of what was happening. I saw her body shudder in terror as she reached up and clawed wildly at the harness around her chin.

"Don't move yet," I gasped, pulling myself into the therapy room and crawling toward the humming machine.

"My God! My God!" she screamed, finally shoving the chin strap off by digging her fingers between the material and her flabby cheeks and pushing up as hard as she could. I looked up and could see her big eyes rolling around in her head like marbles in a rocking saucer. Reaching forward and up I turned the timer off. Mercifully the machine stopped moving.

"Oh God! What's happening?" she shrieked, trying to pull herself up. Two more bullets whistled into the tiny room, burying themselves in the wall only inches away from Bertha's fat, flat nose.

"Just stay calm," I said, my pulse pounding in my ears as I fumbled with the leather harness around her thighs.

“Goddamn it!” I muttered. Her fat hips pressed too hard against the buckle. My fingers were icy and trembling with terror and couldn’t manipulate the tongue of the buckle. “Son-of-a-bitch!” I said under my breath, pulling down one end of the strap as hard as I could with my right hand as I reached up and dug my left fist into Bertha’s fat belly.

“OOOMMMMF!” she cried out as I pushed the flab hard toward the wall, trying to roll it out of the way of the buckle. “You’re hurting me,” she wailed, reaching down with her hands and trying to push me away. I found myself soon fighting with her as I kept tugging at the strap and fumbling with the buckle.

“Okay, okay,” I muttered as I felt the thigh harness slacken. Flipping it open, I ducked down again and crawled to the foot of the table, reaching up and sliding the leg restraints of those incredible tiny ankles. Even in this tight situation, I couldn’t help wondering at how those thin things...but that wasn’t helping us get out.

“They’ll kill us!” she shrieked, pulling up her knees protectively to her chest as another bullet screamed through the air and cracked

into the venetian blind support over the shattered window.

“Just roll off the table,” I said, reaching up and trying to straighten her legs. She was curling up into a fetal position and sobbing hysterically. Then a second bullet severed the venetian blind support and sent the white blades clattering to the floor. Bertha shrieked, then wriggled her flabby ass to the left until her great body was over the edge of the table. I tried to break her fall; but that was impossible. That woman swept through the air like a white avalanche of lard. In an instant I was suffocating under a mountain of wiggling hot flesh and fluttering cotton. Once on the floor Bertha’s hysterics took a decided turn for the worse.

“Save me! Help me!” she cried, tilting her head back and screaming something incoherent after that while she sat spread eagled on the cold tiles.

“Against this wall,” I said, climbing out from under the tangle of her arms and legs and trying to pull her away from the doorway.

“Oh God! God!” she shrieked, reaching out and wrapping her fat hands around my shoulders. She drew me to her, burying my face between her mountainous, wrinkled

boobs and clawing at my back as more shots were fired into the main therapy room.

“For God’s sake, control yourself!” I yelled, reaching up and trying to push her away. It was then I discovered Bertha wasn’t all fat. Her strength was tremendous, pulling me tightly against her with a force like that of a planet tugging at its satellite.

“Ohhhh! OHHHHHH!” she wailed, rocking back and forth and chanting as if she were an Eastern mystic while her hands still clawed at my shoulders and back. I became aware of a pungent, slightly foul odor as I found my face being shoved deeper and deeper between her flabby titty flesh. I hated to land a punch into Bertha’s belly again. But I figured it was the only way I could get both of us out of the firing range.

“OOOOMMMUPHHF!” she gasped, reeling back as I shoved my right fist somewhat gently into her gelatinous belly. The clawing and screaming stopped, two items well worth the price of that ungentlemanly act.

“Come on,” I said, taking her right hand and tugging at it as I crawled to the far corner of the tiny room. Something finally seemed to click in her mind. Her eyes focused again and she looked at me as if

she'd seen me for the first time. "Come ON!"

Another bullet hissing through the air and, burying itself in the side of the treatment table, convinced her. In fact Bertha moved faster than I did, scooting across the smooth floor incredibly swiftly considering her size.

"Stay there," I said as Bertha curled up into a tight big ball in the corner. "He can't fire anything into that corner," I reassured her.

"Don't leave me," she wailed, leaning forward and reaching out at me with her big arms. Her face wrinkled up into a mask of sheer terror while big jelly-like tears welled up and oozed over her red, pouch-like cheeks.

"You'll be fine," I said, feeling an overwhelming desire to get away from that woman before she dragged me back into her jugs again.

"Where the hell are the cops?" I muttered out loud, crawling back into the main therapy room. I crawled back to the desk, closing the door to the tiny room behind me with the toe of my right foot.

"Probably pinned down on the other floors," Paul suggested.

In the background I could hear the wail of sirens drawing closer to the hospital. And of course there were Bertha's sobs filtering through the doorway.

"Want to make a break for the stairs?" Paul asked, poking his head out and looking longingly at the opened main door.

I'd thought about that too. The problem was an open space approximately six feet across between the main door of the therapy room and the top landing of the stairs of the door of the elevator. Whoever was firing into the hospital was aware of that open area, I was sure. It would be a suicide attempt to run out of the relative safety of the room into that spade.

"I don't think so. The..." I started to say, then stopped as I realized the shooting had stopped. Both Paul and I crouched down like animals, pricking up our ears to catch any sound that might tell us what was happening next.

Several minutes went by without any shots being fired into the room. I knew the police cars had arrived in front of the hospital. Yet I couldn't believe the sniper would stop just because of that. Since he had a particular thing for police officers, their

arrival might be a temptation he couldn't resist.

More minutes went by without any shots.

"You think we can get up?" Paul asked. Just then we heard the sounds of many footsteps clattering up the stairs.

"It's him!" Paul said, his eyes widening with fear.

"Then he's got eight legs," I said, looking out the door and seeing Ed's flushed face suddenly pop into view from the stairwell.

"Everybody okay?" he asked, dashing through the open space and into the room. Paul and I scrambled out from under the desk, crunching the layer of broken glass under our heels. I still stayed clear of the shattered window. That madman could still be out there waiting.

"There's a woman in there," I panted breathlessly as I stood spread-legged by the door and surveyed the damage. Broken glass was everywhere. Several bullets had punctured one of the hotpack heaters. Steaming water still poured through three tiny holes onto the floor. The wall directly behind Greig's desk as well as the face of the door leading to the tiny therapy room was peppered with bullet holes. The room

reminded me of those shattered villages I'd seen during the Vietnam War.

"Did you catch him?" Paul asked.

"No. By the time we got here, he'd managed to get off that building," one of the officers said as Ed ducked into the other therapy room to see about Bertha. Both Paul and I bent down and peered through the first window at a five-story red brick apartment house opposite the hospital. "He's like a ghost. We don't know who he is or why he's tearin' up the town. Whenever we get to where he's shooting, he disappears."

I felt my flesh crawl as I thought about the ghostly sniper and how close Paul and I had come to joining the ranks of the spirit world.

"My God! My God!" I heard Bertha wail. The door opened again and I saw Ed hauling the wailing woman out. She'd knocked off his cap and thrown her big arms around his chest, pulling herself tightly to his body. It was already getting a little boring watching Bertha go into her terror act.

"It's okay. Everything's going to be okay." Ed said reassuringly, reaching up and trying to pull Bertha off his body. That was an impossibility. The woman's arms were like tentacles, clinging tightly to the blond cop in

a death grip as her entire body shuddered and swayed.

“I was almost killed! KILLED!”

“Please, let go!”

“The city’s gonna hear about this!”

“Excuse me, Mrs. Kopinsky. Will you be coming in tomorrow?”

“Check the bullets in the wall.”

“You’re crushing my balls!”

“If you think I’d come up here again...”

“Watch out for the glass.”

“He tried to kill me!”

“Get ahold of yourself, and let go of me!”

The room echoed with confusion, sobs, wails, orders and Bertha’s threats as it filled rapidly with a sea of policemen. We all wanted to get out of there. I felt as if we were standing in the middle of ground zero waiting for the bomb to go off.

Bertha finally let go of Ed only when he threatened to drag her down to Parker Center and hold her for questioning as a material witness. More police arrived with special equipment boxes. While they dug out the myriad of bullets still embedded in the walls and door, Ed and the others interviewed us for information.

When it was all over they learned nothing more than they knew earlier. The only beneficial thing to come out of the incident was Bertha's vow never to come back. I felt the trauma was well worth that reward.

"Let's get out of here," I said, breathing a sigh of relief as I watched the people from the lab pack up their kits and leave. Bertha had left thirty minutes ago, huffing and wailing threats over her shoulder as two young patrolmen escorted her to the elevator and down to the lobby. Only Paul, me, Ed, and three other officers were left in the room.

"You think I can talk to you for a sec," Ed said softly as Paul stood talking with the other policemen near the door. Both Ed and I were by the hotpack heaters supposedly examining the bullet holes in the tall stainless steel cabinet.

"I don't want to talk now," I said, lying through my teeth as I refused to look at Ed. I was angry because of his cold, self-serving attitude earlier that day.

"Please. Will you come over tonight?"

"What? And spoil your hunt for cunt? I wouldn't dream of it."

"Please. I'll get out of it. Just come over."

“No way. If you need a father confessor, go see a priest or psychiatrist. You’re not going to use me for your couch.”

“Please, Jack.”

“No! No! No!”

Chapter Six

The English language has often been called one of the most exact tongues in the world. A polyglot of words and phrases extracted from other languages, English has a vast variety of words one can choose from to convey the most exact and precise thought.

It's amazing, therefore, why the word no (and yes at times, though far less frequently) is so often misunderstood and taken to mean the opposite. It seems to excite anyone who hears it into believing the speaker is either a liar or is a tease speaking with "forked tongue." This was the case with me earlier that day. I swore both to myself as well as Ed I wouldn't go to his apartment that evening. Yet every time I said no it was as if I heard a

returning echo saying yes. Ed apparently heard the same echo. At eight-thirty that same evening I found myself standing in front of his door, ringing the bell and feeling my heart threatening to rip through my flesh.

“Hi!”

“Hi!”

The two of us stood quietly for several seconds’ worth of embarrassed silence. Finally I became conscious of standing in the dark on the second floor landing of an apartment house in the Silver Lake district. People looking at me must have thought I was pushing religious magazines. I felt like an Avon Lady.

“Can I come in?”

“Oh, sure, sure,” Ed said, snapping out of his little trance and backing awkwardly into his apartment. As he closed the door behind me I surveyed the living room. It was the typical box-type of construction so prevalent in Los Angeles. The ceiling was covered with white flocking studded with something that made it sparkle even in the rather dim lamplight. A nondescript couch covered in fading yellow silkish material was pushed against the wall to my right. Two matching chairs stood on either side of it, while a low, rectangular coffee table covered

in scratched brown formica made to look like wood squatted in front of the couch.

“Nice. Honey,” I commented, lying shamelessly as I walked toward a bookcase built in the wall opposite the entrance doorway. I scanned the five rows of hardbound and paperback books jammed carelessly onto the wooden shelves. I was impressed. Tolstoy, Murdock, James, Joyce, Woolf, Chaucer, Shakespeare; I had no idea Ed had a classical background in literature.

“Mostly mine,” he said proudly as he saw me fingering some of the books. My opinion of the blond cop was soaring to the skies with every passing second.

I mumbled something complimentary, then moved to the left of the bookcase and stared at a collection of records as classic as the books—Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Bartok. His tastes were scattered—possibly even undisciplined. But one thing for sure. Ed was no typical red-necked patrolman whose idea of great literature was the Sunday funnies.

“Something to drink?”

“Vodka on the rocks’ll be fine,” I said, bending down and thumbing through the large collection of records. While he mixed the drinks Ed told me something about his

background. He'd gone to Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. It was a school where students were poetic revolutionaries whose doctrines were left of Mao. He majored in English and minored in Music Theory, both subjects of course preparing him for completely nothing in the "outside" world of competitive employment. After serving four years in the Air Force, Ed went back to school, this time majoring in police science. It was then he became interested in police street work and decided to be a cop. It was also about then when he realized he was gay.

"The two of us went through the academy together," Ed said, smiling as he knelt down next to me and handed me my drink. "I didn't even know what was going on inside me then. Guess I thought we were just fooling around—that it didn't mean anything."

Ed chuckled to himself and shook his head slowly back and forth.

"But after we graduated from the academy we did everything we did to pull duty together. Of course they paired us up with older cops until we got more experience. But finally we managed to get the same patrol car."

“Convenient,” I commented wryly, sipping my drink and feeling a little jealous. He was probably going to tell me what we’d experienced in the therapy department was fun and beautiful, but didn’t mean anything really. I braced myself for the letdown.

“It was,” Ed continued, ignoring my tone of voice. “It was funny too. Nobody in the department suspected a thing,” Ed said, smiling broadly as he raised his right hand and scratched his forehead. I swallowed another swig of vodka, enjoying the burning sensation it gave to my throat. I needed something to steady myself as I heard Ed go on and on about this lover.

“The two of you must be very happy.”

“Not any more,” Ed said, his smile turning slightly sad. “We dated girls, you know.”

“Doubled, right?”

“Right,” Ed said, smiling now at me, his eyes dancing wildly in his head. I thought I was going to lose control right then and kiss him desperately. Instead I took another gulp of the drink, nearly choking on the amount of vodka I’d swallowed. “I used to love hearing him fucking one of the girls next to me. It turned me on.”

“Jesus!” I muttered under my breath. I was out of vodka. I didn’t know how much longer I could stand this confession without booze going down my throat.

“Then we’d take the girls home and go back to the apartment and...well, you know.”

I said something affirmative, I think, then scrambled to my feet and headed for the makeshift bar Ed had set up on the coffee table. The bottle of vodka stood conveniently at the right edge of the table. I filled the glass to the top then took another long swig as Ed kept talking behind me.

“Then they had some kind of witch hunt going on at the department. Nobody suspected us. But he got scared and so did I. He transferred out to the Valley division right away. I never heard from him again,” Ed said sadly, raising his glass of what looked like bourbon and water.

“I’d think he’d at least have sent you a Christmas card,” I said flippantly, feeling drunk as I stumbled back to the record shelf and sank to my knees next to Ed.

“As a matter of fact I did hear about him. It was about a week ago in the papers. He was one of the cops killed by that sniper.”

Ed’s words fell on my brain like bombs. I’d been prepared for one revelation and got

one that caught me completely unprepared. I felt horribly ashamed of myself and what I'd been thinking. I suddenly felt cheap and sordid.

"Something wrong?"

"I'd better go," I mumbled, dropping my drink to the green carpeted living room floor. I felt something cold and wet seeping under my left knee. "Oh God, I'm sorry," I slurred a little drunkenly as I got up and looked around for something to wipe up the liquor.

"It's all right."

"No, no it isn't," I said urgently. In some crazy way that overturned vodka suddenly took on the color of a universal shattering act. All I could think of was wiping up the mess I'd made.

"Where are you going?" Ed asked, rising and looking bewildered as I staggered toward the kitchen doorway.

"A towel or something..." I started to say as I turned around and looked at Ed. He stood in the middle of the living room, his face flickering confusion, yearning and sympathy. I felt good old lust rising in my body again and swelling up my cock to its enormous size. But there was something new breaking loose in my body. I didn't know if it was the vodka or some strange

understanding or communication that had suddenly established itself in my mind.

“Eddy,” I mumbled.

He was unable to control the muscles of his face. He covered it for a moment with both hands, then rubbed his cheeks violently and lowered his arms down to his sides. His face beamed with joy. We walked toward one another. When we were a few feet apart we paused and stared hard at each other.

“Eddy,” I repeated. He took another step forward. I thought my knees would give way. I saw his face stripped of all the masks he wore to hide his emotions. I took a final step and he caught my arm. Suddenly we found ourselves locked together. We turned about and fell to our knees, then sank slowly sideways to the floor. In a second we were kissing long and hard like people after a long thirst who drink at last.

“Let’s go to bed,” he said huskily, sliding his powerful hands around my sides then down to my buttocks. I could tell he well remembered what had happened between us earlier that day.

“What about Bill?”

“He won’t be home for hours,” Ed said, raising himself off the floor and glancing at his wristwatch.

My mind whirled around in a storm of confusion. I wanted Ed desperately. And I knew fucking around in his apartment wasn't the wisest thing in the world to do, especially if his straight roommate traipsed in with a blonde in one arm. That was what my reasoning half told me. Thank God the vodka burned the reasoning half out.

"Come on," I said, slipping my arm under Ed's and walking toward what I guessed would be his bedroom. For some uncanny reason I was. We moved silently into the darkened cool room, shutting the door behind us and locking it. If Bill did come home early I'd probably have to climb out the second-story bedroom window. Normally I'd be terrified of the prospect. But the close vicinity of Ed's big body and the vodka still burning in my veins made me careless.

"It'll be different here. I swear it will," Ed said mysteriously as I felt his arms fumbling with the buttons of my shirt. We undressed each other rapidly, nearly tearing the clothes off the other's swaying body. The air burned in my lungs as my head pounded with lust and excitement. I felt transported into another world as Ed slipped his fingers into my briefs and pulled them down to the floor. Somehow I stepped out of them and fell

forward onto Ed's hot, naked body. I gasped out, feeling his long, thick cock brushing up against my groin, then sliding up my belly as I pressed my body against his. Our balls touched, rubbing together as he rocked back and forth on our heels. I could feel Ed's hot, wet breath blowing against my cheeks as I tilted my head back and pressed my groin harder against Ed's crotch. My cock shot between his legs. I groaned as I felt him clamp his legs shut and rub his hairy, inner thighs slowly back and forth against my rod.

"God, God, God," I murmured over and over again like a broken record as I felt Ed's warm lips slide up and down the sides of my neck. His hands crawled over my arms, shoulder, sides and buttocks, squeezing my flesh hard while he continued rocking and swaying. I fought for breath and balance as my head spun dizzily. The room turned into a carrousel, whirling crazily around at breakneck speed as the two of us panted and moaned loudly.

His mouth edged closer to my mouth. I felt his right hand slide quickly up my back until it reached my head. Ed forced it forward, pressing his lips against mine and nearly making me gag with the sudden insertion of his thick tongue. My skin burned

and crackled with lust as I felt a dam of mixed emotions break apart inside me. I didn't just want Ed's cock now. It was like that earlier today. But now I felt a powerful drive of possessiveness sweep over me. I grabbed tightly onto him, pulling him closer to me until the muscles in my arms ached. I wanted to swallow him, drive my body into him until we were wearing the same skin.

Somehow we edged back to the bed. Neither of us thought about taking off the bedspread. I felt myself floating through the air and realized then I was falling down onto the bed. Ed came quickly after me, pressing my body deep into the soft mattress as his hands fluttered around my belly and cock.

I mumbled and babbled like the village idiot, spreading my legs and hunching up my knees as he nestled into the opened space. I trapped him with my arms and legs, hunching up to meet him as I wriggled my hips from side to side. His stiff body hairs scratched against my sensitive cock. I didn't care. Every move he made against my body sent me into a higher place of emotional and physical awareness. We thrashed together, gripping, clawing, pressing desperately against one another as our cocks throbbed heavily against each other.

“I’m cumming!” Ed gasped into my ear.

“Oh God, hold off, Ed. Hold off,” I cried.

“Too late,” he said. I could feel something hot and wet spurting against my belly. That sensation set me off. I dug my head into the pillow and growled deep in my throat like an animal. I dug the balls of my feet hard into Ed’s sides as I shot myself almost into unconsciousness.

We grunted and moaned for several seconds, working our shooting cocks together until the last wad spurted out.

I lay back and looked at the dark ceiling, feeling myself floating off the bed. I could hear Ed’s steady breathing next to me.

“Sorry about that,” I said, reaching over and trailing the fingers of my right hand along the hairy area of his big chest.

“About what?”

“About us cumming so soon,” I said, really disappointed that we couldn’t do anything except rub cocks together like two sticks of wood.

“Doesn’t matter. The night’s still young,” Ed said, turning over and pressing me against him again. I sighed happily and kissed him long and hard. I was glad he didn’t want me to go after he’d shot off. “With a hot shooter

like you, you don't think I'm gonna let you get out of here that fast."

We laughed together, then lay quietly for several minutes, listening to the other breathe and drinking in the warm feel of our bodies.

"Who do you suppose he is?" I asked.

"Hm?"

"The sniper. I mean, the department's got to have some kind of theory," I said, pulling my head back from Ed's and looking into his eyes. In the darkness of the bedroom they glistened like two black pools.

"Oh, they've got a couple. About as many as we've got cops," Ed said inhaling sharply, then rolling back on his ass. "Some guys think he's an ex-cop gone bananas. He seems to know a lot about police movements and how the department operates under situations like the ones he's causing."

"It's just weird. I mean the way he moves around the city. Hit and run, and nobody can find him," I said, remembering with a chill how those bullets rained in terror in the therapy room that afternoon. "It's just hard to believe we don't have any clue on him. He's operating on his own, it seems," Ed said grimly.

We didn't say anything after that. I thought about how Paul and I wound up

crouching under the desk with the woman shrieking in the other room while bullets shattered the windows and dug into the wall behind us.

“Let’s leave the detective business to the detectives,” Ed finally said, rolling back over on his side and rubbing against me. I could feel something stiff and warm pressing against my left leg.

“Take more time this time?” I asked as I felt my cock rising with blood again.

“You bet.”



It was a wonderful night. Both Ed and I took our times the second time around. Neither of us knew if Bill came in or not. Both of us were transported into another dimension that evening, drinking in the other’s body as we fucked into the early hours of the morning.

The next day I woke up next to Ed. He’d been awake earlier and was lying quietly on his right side staring at me.

“You’re beautiful,” he mumbled, kissing me on the forehead before he rolled out of bed and staggered toward the door. “I’ll see if it’s clear,” he whispered, unlocking the

bedroom door and poking his head out into the hall. Bill's room was empty. The big stud had found some pussy in the Marina.

I glanced at the clock. Six o'clock. Plenty of time to eat, dress and get to work. Ed made breakfast for me while I showered and brushed my teeth. The life of a cop! He didn't have to go in today until three this afternoon.

We sat and ate together quietly, occasionally making comments about what happened in bed the night before. The bedspread was hopelessly ruined. Somehow I'd torn a good section out of the material with my hands. And of course the cum stains were more than obvious. I remarked that it was the best way I knew of to ruin something if you had to do it. "Well, tonight you'll have to wreck your own. I'll be too fuckin' tired to do anything. Besides, Bill's going to be home," Ed said as I got up to go.

"There's always my place."

I lived in Venice alone in a one-room single apartment overlooking the ocean. The best thing that could be said about the apartment was it had a fantastic view, was cheap, soundproofed, and surrounded by neighbors who couldn't care if you were into nude goldfish violation.

Ed tilted his head to one side, thinking over the proposition. He broke into a broad smile, then looked down into his coffee cup.

“Give me the address. I’ll be there.”

I wrote down directions on how to get to my apartment, then said goodbye hurriedly and ran out the apartment. On the way to work I kept thinking about Ed and that fantastic night in bed. I was no whore, but I’d been around the track many times with many types. No one had gotten to me the way that big blond cop did that evening. I didn’t want to start thinking about setting up some kind of “relationship” with him. I wasn’t to that stage yet. Right now I was enjoying this kind of warm, satisfying glow that bathed my mind and body whenever I thought about Ed—which was, by the way, quite often now.

When I pulled into the hospital employee parking lot I saw Greig climbing out of his yellow Pinto. I honked twice and waved out my window as I pulled into my space.

“Hear there was some excitement up here yesterday,” Greig said, walking up to my car as I turned off the engine.

“You should’ve seen it!” I said, climbing out and slamming the door behind me. I told Greig about the sniper, Bertha, the confusion

that followed—everything except what happened between me and Ed, of course.

We walked up the stairs together, wondering out loud if that maniac would strike again. Neither of us particularly enjoyed the prospect of working in a battle zone condition.

“There you are! You’re late!”

I groaned inwardly. It was Bertha, squatting on one of two large wooden chairs we always had standing outside the door of the therapy room for patients who arrived early.

“Who...?” Greig started to ask, turning to me and showing confusion. Bertha continued to yell.

“That’s the woman I told you about,” I said above her shouts as we reached the door and unlocked it.

“I’m surprised you’re here after what happened yesterday,” I said as amicably as I could.

“I’m lucky I’m alive! Especially after what you did to me in there!”

Greig turned around and flashed me a sick smile as I opened the door to the small treatment room and flicked on the light.

“Just take off your clothes and put on one of those gowns...”

“I know, I know. I’m no idiot. I’m a GS-6, you know!” she interrupted, waving her right hand in the air as she waddled into the smaller room.

I shrugged my shoulders and closed the bullet-ridden door behind her. Greig was standing with his back to the desk. The evening cleaning crew had swept up all the glass and removed the jagged pieces that had remained fixed to the frames. No one had replaced the broken windows yet. A hot, dry breeze blew in through the open spaces against our faces. The morning air was heating up already. I groaned as I thought of how the temperature would rise quickly in the room unless we got some glass in those holes fast.

“Christ!” Grieg said, turning around and examining the holes in the walls. “It’s looks like a World War II flick.”

“That’s about what it felt like,” I said, feeling uneasy about standing in front of those windows. I looked out and could see that red brick apartment building from which the sniper had fired at us. Instinctively I moved away from the window toward the exercise table.

“Well, let’s get to work. We’ll have to make do until the repair folks get here.”

We tied on our smocks and started getting the room ready for the patients. I gave Bertha over to Greig's care, not feeling particularly interested in treating the woman today. I chuckled to myself as I heard Bertha's mouth rattling away a mile a minute as Grieg tried to strap her down to the treatment table. He was normally good-natured. But I could tell the fat woman was trying even Greig's patience.

"Too bad the sniper's bullets didn't get her yesterday," he said in a loud whisper as he walked into the room, closing the door shut behind him. Through the wood I could hear the grinding, whirring sounds of the "rack" filtering into the main room.

The morning went fairly quickly in spite of the rising temperatures inside the department. Bertha survived the terrors of the table, enduring a half-hour hotpack treatment (continually screaming she was being burned by us purposely) and weathering an ultrasonic vibrator with Spartan courage. Both of us had removed our smocks, shirts and undershirts by eleven o'clock, having wrapped cold towels around our necks to keep cool as the temperature rose to ninety-five. The air conditioning worked overtime. But the hot blasts from the

Santa Ana winds overpowered what little comfortable cool air came through the overhead vents.

Just before lunch the repairmen came with glass for the windows. Grieg and I practically welcomed them as messiahs. The hot dry air was sapping our strength quickly as we worked on equally sweating patients. Behind them traipsed two policemen from the lab with three men from the detective bureau.

“What can I do for you guys?” Grieg asked, wiping the sweat off his forehead. I’d just finished massaging a motor cop and was changing the linen of his table when I saw one of the detectives wave for me to come over to them.

“We looked at all the bullets,” he said, pulling a thick packet of photographs from a yellow envelope. “I want you to see something.”

Grieg and I leaned over the edge of the desk as the detective spread out the photos across the top. They were microscopic pictures of the bullets’ markings. Each photo to me looked like a confusion of grey and white and black lines waving across the glossy finish.

“So?” I asked.

“Look at these,” he said, waving his hands over five photos running along the left edge of the desk. Greig and I dutifully shifted our eyes to the pictures, examining the meaningless marks and lines. “They were taken of bullets at two other sniper sites. Now look at these,” he said, waving his hands over six photos on the other side of the desk.

Greig and I changed position and stared at the other pictures. At first they looked the same to me. Then I started shifting my eyes back and forth. I thought I could see some differences between the first set of pictures and the second. I wasn’t sure.

“These match up with these,” the detective said, indicating the first three pictures on the right side of the desk with all those of the left. “But we’ve got a whole other ballgame with these,” he commented, pointing at the three bottom pictures.

I wiped the sweat from my eyes, reaching down and picking up one of the bottom pictures and comparing it with the others. There were differences in the bullet’s markings.

“Two guns?” I asked, looking up at the grim-faced detective.

“Either that, or two people.”

“Two people? Why two people? You mean it’s catching?” I asked incredulously.

“We don’t know. We don’t even know about the first guy let alone this second one—if there is a second one. You can’t remember seeing anybody from the windows?” he asked me, picking up the photos from the desk and stuffing them back in the envelope.

“Are you kidding? I was busy ducking,” I said, almost breaking out into laughter at the question.

The detective sighed, then fixed his jaw grimly and turned to go. The repair men had put in the first window and were working on the second. Already I could feel the air conditioning working.

“I was hoping you might. If there’s two of them running around the city, God help all of us,” he said, walking briskly out of the room and into the stairwell.

“People like that make me feel secure,” I said, feeling a chill creeping over my body as I thought about the possibility of two maniacal snipers.

“At least you can hope that lightning never strikes twice,” Greig said.

“Hey, somebody. It’s off!”

Bertha was back in form.

“The call of the wild,” I said, nodding toward the door. Greig sighed, then walked into the tiny treatment room and started prying the woman out of the table’s complex system of harnesses.

As Greig worked with Bertha, I moved to the desk and sat down. The workers busily slipped the new plate glass into the gaping holes, fixing them firmly, unconcerned and probably unaware of what happened twenty-four hours earlier. My eyes drifted back to the first window and out to that red brick apartment building opposite me. I thought about that rain of death that had almost eliminated Paul, Bertha and me from the human race. In an instant we were nearly shuffled off to oblivion. In seconds, what had taken a literal lifetime to build for each of us might have been destroyed utterly.

I shuddered again and turned away from the window to the appointment book. What happened, happened. No sense in growing morbid over the past. I’d escaped disaster neatly. Why dwell on something like that when I had my future (and of course Ed was mixed in with those thoughts) to think of.

So I sat, completely unaware of the darkening clouds gathering over our lives.

Chapter Seven

“**H**ow many patients do we have left?” I asked Greig as I finished changing the water in the first whirlpool tank.

He walked over to his appointment book and flipped over a page.

“Five. Two twisted ankles, one wrenched back, and two sore necks.”

I glanced up at the clock. It was three-thirty, a half hour before quitting time. I prayed they wouldn’t show. I’d stayed late the day before. I didn’t want to make a habit out of it.

“Oh-oh,” Greig said as we heard the elevator door sliding open. He flashed me a look of amusement, knowing I was hoping the appointments wouldn’t show. Actually it

wasn't so much me not wanting to work. During the last hour my mind had been playing last night over and over in my head. I saw every detail; felt every sensation; heard every whisper the two of us had spoken only a few hours ago. The more I thought about all this, the more intense the visions came about Ed and me. Sometimes I actually slipped from the reality of therapy room to the imagined past of Ed's bed.

It was a form of insanity. But it was a kind of psychosis I was enjoying. I relished this kind of thinking and resented anything that took me away from it. During the past hour I physically withdrew from Greig, working silently on the occasional patient who came in, then walked off to the whirlpool room and pretend to perform maintenance while I sat and thought of last night. It was actually painful to snap myself out of these almost morbid musings.

"There you are!"

The sound of that voice was the sharpest mental pain I could think of at the moment. Bertha Kopinsky! What in God's name was she doing up here now? She wasn't supposed to come in for two days.

"You're not supposed to come in for two days!" Thank you, Greig.

“Look at me! Look at me!”

I couldn't ignore her any more. Pulling myself out of my stupor and focused my eyes on the mountainous woman. Her head was tilted to the right to such a degree that her ear was pressed tightly against her shoulder. Her face, as usual, was flushed red with anger. My only hope—and probably the hope of anyone who really knew Bertha—was that she'd go soon because of high blood pressure.

“What happened?” Greig said, obviously trying to hide his amusement as he walked up to Bertha and started to slip his right hand around her neck.

“Don't you touch me! You did this to me. I was alright until you put me on that that THING!” Bertha wailed, obviously referring to the rack.

“Why did you come up here, then? I've got to touch you to help you,” Greig reasoned.

The big woman fell silent for several seconds. I could hear the wheels in her mind squeak in thought as she studied Greig's face cagily.

“All right. But just you watch what you're doing. I know about malpractice. I'm a civil servant! You can't fool around with me,” she

cried on and on as Greig motioned for me to get a hotpack ready for her neck.

I heard Bertha and Greig arguing in the small therapy room as I opened one of the hotpack heaters and pulled my head back because of the sudden onrush of steam. Pulling a smaller pack out from the hot water, I threw it on a mountain of wet towels as the elevator door slid open again. I groaned once more as I caught someone walking in through the corners of my eyes.

“Hi, kid.”

It was Ed!

“I thought you were on duty at three!” I said, glancing up at the overhead clock. It was quarter to four. “You’re supposed to be on the street.”

“My partner said it was all right for me to come up here for a second and make an appointment,” Ed said, looking around obviously to see if anyone else was in the room. A high-pitched wail through the door told him everything. He made a face, then broke into a smile as both of us heard Bertha make her usual claim to intelligence due to being a civil servant.

“You’ve already got an appointment,” I said, referring to tonight. I saw Ed’s face flicker with animal excitement. He was

standing a good six feet away from me. But I could feel the sexual heat radiating through his blue woolen policeman's uniform and enveloping me in a whirlwind of lust and emotion. His eyes seemed to turn color, becoming a more intense blue as they literally vibrated in his head. I wanted to reach out and take him. But there was Greig and, of course, Bertha.

"I'll be there. I just wanted to come up and see how things were," Ed said, tearing his eyes off me and looking around the room.

"The repairmen came today to put in the windows," I said as I started to move toward Ed. It was as if some magnet were drawing me to the big blond cop. I don't know what would have happened if Greig didn't yell through the closed door like a wounded bull.

"Jack! How about the hotpack?"

"I've got to get to work," I said, snapping myself out of that trance painfully and starting to wrap three towels around the steaming hotpack.

"See you tonight. I'm working this area now, so we shouldn't have too much action," Ed said, saluting me playfully as he ducked out the doorway and ran down the stairs.

I handed Grieg the hot pack through a crack in the door, then walked back to the desk as two academy cadets in their khaki uniforms wandered into the room with their caps in hand. I'd always been amazed how the police academy can turn people into mini Marines in a matter of days. They stood at attention in the middle of the doorway, stiff and rigid as I took their cards and read the doctor's prognosis for whatever they had.

Two more patients, I groaned to myself, looking at the clock and wondering just how long a treatment I should give them. There were still approximately fifteen minutes to go. Hopefully the other patients wouldn't show.

"Ankle sprains, eh? Come on in the whirlpool room," I said, motioning them to follow me.

"Jesus Christ! That woman's out of her mind! She wants to sue the AMA. We don't even belong to it!" Greig said, closing the door to the small therapy room behind him and walking up to his desk. His face was flushed with frustration as he picked up Bertha's card in his right hand. For a second I thought he was going to rip it up.

"Sprains," I said, nodding toward the two hobbling cadets as they shuffled into the

whirlpool room a little shame-faced. I was about to follow then when I heard what sounded like shots or backfires coming from outside the window. After what had happened yesterday, I was understandably a little touchy about loud sounds.

“Just some Mexican’s truck around here. You know everybody in the neighborhood drives cars made before 1960,” Greig said, still looking at Bertha’s card while he looked at me and smiled. Greig’s smile quickly faded, however, when we heard the loud explosions increase in intensity. They were now accompanied by screams.

“What’s going on?” I asked in a tense whisper. I dropped the treatment cards to the floor and ran across the floor to one of the windows. I felt the blood drain from my face as I peered out onto the street below. At first everything looked relatively normal. Then I realized people were running east and west on Sixth Street, screaming and shouting and covering up their ears as more shots were fired. By now, I was certain they were shots.

“Get away from the window,” Greig said tersely. He was thinking the same thing I was. The sniper was back!

I scanned the street below, trying to see where the people were running from. The

action seemed to be taking place around the front entrance of the Hughes supermarket adjoining that red brick apartment building where the sniper had held out yesterday. Pressing my face against the window and looking down to the left I could see three police cars bumper to bumper in front of the hospital. From the sounds of the shots, I guessed they were firing at someone in the market. There were more screams, followed by more shots. Even from that distance I could hear the sharp crashing sound of the plate glass windows shattering as bullets rained into the supermarket's interior.

"Looks like a holdup," I said, a little relieved the action wasn't related to the sniper's activities. I still watched in fascination, but this time with some amount of detachment as the drama played out in front of me.

"Looks like a standoff," Greig said, moving up next to me and looking through the same window. We watched as the street rapidly cleared of automobile and pedestrian traffic. The thieves fired randomly out the shattered front plate glass windows while the police fired back. I knew it would only be a matter of seconds before the SWAT team was called in.

“My neck! It’s too hot!”

“Why don’t you go in there and break it for me,” Greig muttered as he pushed himself away from the window and started for the therapy room Bertha was in. At the same time I turned and walked toward the whirlpool room. I could see the cadets had their trousers off and were standing in front of the big tanks awkwardly, wondering what was expected of them now.

“Just hop up into those chairs. I’ll...” I started to say. My sentence was cut off by what I suddenly noticed was standing in the doorway. They looked like two statues wrapped in cloth. One was six feet three inches tall with narrow, slightly stooping shoulders, probably turned in that way because of his height and the fear of running his head into hanging things. His hands hung almost limply at his sides. I could see his thick wrists and a good deal of skin above that before I ran into his frayed jacket sleeve. He looked in his mid-forties. His light brown hair was incredibly unkempt, hanging down the sides of his grizzled face in thick, greasy patches. My eyes shifted down to his pants—that is, what there was left of them. The dark brown material had faded to a shiny blackish tint, interrupted occasionally by tears and

outright holes near the knees. A pair of dirty torn tennis shoes completed the picture of this unique intruder.

His companion was the exact opposite picture. Young, probably in his mid-twenties, he was about five feet nine inches and very broad-shouldered. Through his tight-fitting T-shirt I could see the powerful curves of his chest muscles pressing against the white cotton material. His thick arms stuck out of the T-shirt's sleeves like two massive tree trunks. He wore new, clean, actually pressed Levi's held up by a wide, slightly worn black leather belt. His face was lightly tanned and smooth. His narrow thin, high cheek bones and delicate nose made him look much younger than he actually was. Unlike his partner, he looked immaculately clean and scrubbed. His short blond hair was carefully parted at the right side and combed in a large sweep across his wide forehead. He was holding something in his right hand. But as that hand was still behind the doorframe of the entranceway, I couldn't tell what it was.

Both Greig and I stood silently staring at them. Their contrasting physical appearances were almost comic to see. Yet at the same time I felt something sinister about them. I

didn't know why then, but I had the urge to run away from them.

"Can I help you?" Greig said after several seconds of silence went by.

Neither of them spoke a word. Greig's voice seemed to call them into action. Both men looked surprised at finding the two of us standing in front of them. They stared at us for several seconds, then shifted their eyes to the center of the room. I watched in fascination as I saw them examine the department. I could see they were looking for other people. Suddenly I was struck by the idea they were vice. Vice people always dressed like street people.

"None of your partners are up here," I said, about to walk into the whirlpool room.

"What?" the blond asked, screwing up his face in confusion.

"I said none of your partner..." I stopped dead as I froze with terror. He moved into the therapy room in front of his friend. I saw he was carrying a .38 in his right hand and was still staring at me.

"Get over there," he said evenly, motioning with the barrel of his gun for Greig to join me. "Who else is in here?"

"Where the hell are you people?" Bertha wailed through the closed door. The blond

stepped back as the door flew open and Bertha padded out. Her head was finally straightened. She wore only a white patient's gown that hung down to her fat, turned-in knees. Both her hands were up to her neck, holding onto either end of the small hotpack Greig had wrapped earlier. "I could've died in there before anybody came in!"

Bertha stopped in the middle of the room, noticing Greig and me standing frozen like statues. She took another step forward, then wrinkled up her forehead as she turned around. The following shriek would have raised the dead from their tombs if any had been conveniently nearby.

"Shut up and get over there next to them," the blond said to her.

"I didn't do anything. They did it! They did it!" she wailed clutching the hotpack with both hands. She crouched down while holding her elbows tightly into her sides, backing up toward Greig and me and screaming all the time.

"They're not former patients, Bertha," I said, wondering what they wanted.

"Who else is in here?" the blond man asked. I thought about those two cadets in the whirlpool room. Looking through the

corners of my eyes I saw them standing paralyzed by the whirlpool tanks.

“Who are you?” I finally found the courage to ask.

The blond smiled gently, rocking back and forth on his feet. His partner still stayed by the doorway, his hands dangling lifelessly at his sides while he kept the same, bland expression. As I looked at him I felt he’d had every intelligent thought burned out of him long ago.

“Looks like you fixed up the place pretty well since yesterday,” the blond commented, shifting his eyes around to the windows, then to the opposite wall.

“You did the shooting?”

I couldn’t believe it. I was face-to-face with a cop killer! And as corny as it may seem, I thought at the time he didn’t look like a crazed sniper. Even with that .38 in his right hand, he looked more like a kid with a plastic water pistol playing some kind of high school prank.

“You don’t think he did?” the blond said, jerking his head to the right, indicating his older partner.

I looked to the side at the two cadets. If he were the sniper, I wasn’t sure what their chances would be in this room.

“Who’s in there?” the blond asked, stepping forward rapidly and raising his gun higher in the air. Greig and I raised our hands over our heads and backed up as he walked toward the doorway of the whirlpool room. Bertha whimpered, raising her hands too and letting the pack fall with a thud to the floor as the blond edged quickly to the doorway. I held my breath as I watched him run into the open area and crouch down, holding the gun with both hands as he aimed it at the first cadet’s forehead. “Okay, out! Hands behind the head! NOW!”

That bright, innocent face I’d seen a few seconds ago changed alarmingly into the twisted expression of a killer. His hands trembled slightly as he stiffened his arms and followed both cadets from the whirlpool room out to the main therapy room with the barrel of his gun. His right cheek spasmed nervously as his eyes narrowed into two pinpoints of incredible intensity. Every hair on his arm bristled with insane electrical power as he stepped back and swung the gun around in a broad semi-circle toward all of us.

“Just stay that way for a minute,” he said, running now backward toward the main

doorway. The older man still stood like a stuffed rag doll.

“I want you to meet somebody very important,” he said, reaching back and taking the older man by the left hand. This touch seemed to spark the man into life. He raised his head and looked questioningly at us, then shifted his eyes back to the blond man as if to ask him why he were here.

The blond turned his head around briefly, jerking it forward as a signal for his partner to follow him. I watched with feelings mixed with fear and pity as the old man shuffled lopingly across the floor toward us. I looked at Greig, then at the two cadets, and finally at Bertha whose eyes bulged out wider than I’d ever seen them before.

“Know what he is? Know what he used to be?” the young man said in a high, strained voice. His chin was raised slightly and his eyes blazed with fury as he looked at us one by one. His right hand still pointed that loaded .38 at us. “This is a cop.”

Greig and I looked at each other in amazement as the young blond man laughed in an unnaturally shrill voice. What kind of a joke was he trying to play on us?

“Correction. He used to be a cop. He had over twenty years of service to the department. Won all kinds of medals, honors, all that kind of SHIT!”

The young man’s voice became increasingly strained and bitter, ending up into a near-animal shriek when he came to the end of the sentence.

“You’d never guess it looking at him now, would you?” the blond said, watching us closely to see our reaction to his story.

I shifted my eyes away from the younger man and studied his friend. He lapsed back into his former comatose attitude. His eyes glazed over and sank into his head. He was drifting somewhere in his mind, far away from the therapy room and this sniper.

“Pretty, right?”

“What’s your interest in him?” Greig asked.

“Good question. What’s anybody’s interest in him,” the blond said, his expression changing from a kind of intense, ironic amusement to one of despair and anger. He turned halfway around until he was facing the burned-out hull of that man. “What’s he worth to anybody now? He can’t even make a good wino,” the blond said mockingly, shoving the barrel of the gun

hard against the old man's ribs. We all held our breaths as he expected him to blow his partner away.

Instead the blond changed his expression again. His face softened for a second and broke into a pleasant smile as he pulled the gun away from the man and pointed it back in our direction.

"He's my father."

The words crackled through the air. I looked more closely at the two of them still standing side-by-side. With the knowledge he just gave me I could see a slight resemblance between the two men. There were the same high cheek bones, the same delicate nose, the same wide forehead.

"Can you see the resemblance?" the blond asked me, noticing my intent look.

"Yes. But..."

"You're right. There's a difference. My father's got the awareness of a swamp right now. And you can thank the precious police department for that. They stole my father's life away from him. They took his mind, his will to live. And I swear I'm going to pay them back for it." His voice deepened into a harsh, grating tone of hatred.

Suddenly down below I could hear the sounds of guns firing again. The blond

pricked up his ears and leaned toward the outside wall, his face breaking into a broad smile again.

“Here that? Our law-and-order boys and the bad guys shooting it out down there. The SWAT team’ll be here any second. And when they come, I’ll be ready for them,” the blond said, smiling secretly to himself.

“How did you know about this?” I asked, jerking my head toward the window.

“How did I know about any of the things going on?” the blond answered me with another question. My mind went through the events of the past few weeks. With the exception of the Parker Center shootings, the sniper had made his hits when the police were busy at some crime scene. They were so occupied with something else they didn’t realize what was happening until it was too late.

“C.B. Everybody’s got ‘em. With a little bit of money and trouble, I was able to tune into every fuckin’ police call in the county,” the blond said, backing up toward the doorway again.

“How did your father...?” I started to ask.

“You ever hear of the Taddeo case three years back?” he asked, now standing at the doorway and stooping down. He was

reaching around the corner for something, but still kept a close watch on all of us. My arms were beginning to ache from their raised position.

“Taddeo case?” I asked, thinking back to 1973. I was living in Long Beach at the time. But the name Taddeo seemed to strike a familiar chord in my mind.

“Sure! That fella with the Mexican Mafia. There was a big bust that summer—something about dope and prostitution in East L.A. and Pasadena.”

“You remember anything else?” the blond asked, now stooping down and dragging something toward him from behind the wall.

“The trial,” I started to say. Then it hit me. There was a scandal in the police department. L.A.’s cops always prided themselves on being the least corrupt department in the country. But this case uncovered at least three payoffs, one being the assistant to the chief of police. I looked more closely at the tired old man standing in front of me. It was Tom Blenden, the policeman who had to resign in disgrace.

“Your father—Tom Blenden?” I asked. The name raised eyebrows in Greig and the two cadets. Bertha alone wailed in the dark.

“Who’s he?” she asked in a whimper.

The blond ignored the whining fat woman and nodded his head in response to my comment.

“The same. They did a number on him like you wouldn’t believe,” the young man said. He started to shudder with revulsion as he thought about what had happened between his father and the department. “You’d have thought he was the only one on the payroll—that he was the only cop who got hungry.” He got up and walked back up to his father.

“But he was guilty,” one of the cadets said.

“Shut up!” the blond cried angrily. “Who wasn’t. The whole damned department was on the take, but they got together and hung the deal on my father and two other slob. He didn’t even fight back,” the blond said, choking back a sob as he glanced furtively at the hollow man. “The fucker didn’t even fight back!” he screamed, reaching out with his left hand and shoving his father hard across the floor.

The old man stumbled sideways, crashing against the first gotpack heater. He shuffled around regaining his balance after several seconds passed.

“Every day he’d come home from the hearings a little more tired. I watched him getting chipped apart by those damned prosecutors. They pried into every detail of his life. Everything good, honest, constructive thing he did they made dirty until it sounded like he was on the take since the academy!”

I knew Internal Affairs was a brutal division of the police department. Once they got their fangs into a victim, they ripped and tore away until there was nothing left. Obviously they did one of their more admirable and commendable jobs on Tom Blenden. He was a zombie.

“Finally they gave him a choice—resign or face prosecution. He could’ve beat ‘em. I know he could’ve. They didn’t have enough on him and they knew it. He could have fought them all the way and won. But he didn’t want to cause any more trouble. He just laid down his badge and walked out one day. No thanks for all those years; no pension—nothing. They didn’t even open the door for him when he left,” the blond said bitterly.

During the monologue I pictured the terrible destruction of this once powerful man. Next to the chief Tom Blenden held the reigns in the police department. I

remember reading the department couldn't prove anything definite about Blenden taking bribes. Either he'd been too clever to leave tracks or the charges were trumped up. In any case, his hearing had seriously divided the police department. Men were choosing sides, spending their time arguing and plotting against one another. Blenden resigned, supposedly to keep the police department from disintegrating in the midst of all that infighting. No one ever knew if Blenden actually was guilty of taking bribes or not. After several weeks, the story was relegated to the back pages of local newspapers, the soon forgotten.

"When he got home he came apart" the blond said bitterly. "All his old friends—all those old buddies of his he'd helped forgot about him. They were afraid to talk to him—afraid they'd be putting their careers on the line. How many times did my father put his career on the line for them?"

The blond shot angry looks at all of us, then walked quickly back to the doorway. I looked down and saw a medium-sized rectangular wooden crate standing next to the front wall. He dragged it into the room, then ripped the top off.

“They’re all going to pay. Bit by bit, I’m going to make them pay for doing that to my father,” he said angrily. My eyes widened as I saw him pull a grenade out of the box and hold it up to his face. Then I thought of the two different guns that were supposedly used in the shootings. I wondered if he had anyone else helping him in these sneak attacks on the police.

“You use two different guns?” I asked as the blond was busily unloading grenades and packets of rifle ammunition from the crate.

“I knew it wouldn’t take ‘em long to figure it out. No, I don’t use two guns. We use one gun apiece,” he said, looking over at his father.

I followed his stare and looked at the old man. He didn’t look like he could hold water let alone a long-range rifle.

“You don’t think he can shoot?” the blond said, smirking at me. “Not right now. But I can get to him. I’m the only one who can cut through all that fog and get into his brain.”

We all looked at each other again in disbelief. “He thinks he’s shooting at the bad guys when I give him a gun in his hand. He’s a better shot than I am. He got the cops the last time around when I missed,” he said

proudly. “And now he’s gonna get Bill Hansen. He’s the fucker who started the hearing shit three years ago when he was in Internal Affairs. Now he’s on SWAT. I’ve been waitin’ for this chance.”

We watched as he unloaded the crate, then moved back to the doorway and pulled in a large green cotton sack. I could see two wooden rifle butts sticking out of one end of the sack.

“We shot up the place yesterday just for fun. I thought it’d be good to let the fuckin’ cops know they couldn’t hide anywhere—not even in their own damned hospital. I didn’t think we’d be using it today. Funny how things work out, huh?”

I looked away, then suddenly felt a shock of terror ripple through my body. Ed was on duty in this district. He was probably on the street below now, a prime target for Tom Blenden and his crazy son.

Chapter Eight

Bertha wrapped her arms tightly around her chest, rocking slowly back and forth and moaning in terror as Greig and the two cadets sat bound and gagged in the doorway of the whirlpool room. Mike Blenden—Thomas Blenden's blond son—had me tie the three of them up. What he had planned for the woman and me I had no idea.

Glancing up at the clock I saw it was a little after four. It seemed like hours had passed. But in reality, everything had happened in just ten minutes. I could hear more sirens wailing down the street as the shots in front kept up their frequency.

“Okay, pop. It's them. Come on, pop,” Mike said. He'd taken the rifles out earlier

and loaded them, placing them lovingly on the first therapy table opposite Greig's desk. He was peering out the first window, looking down at the street scene as more shots rang out and echoed through the hot afternoon air. My heart was pounding like a bass drum. Ed was down there with all those other cops. None of them realized what a storehouse of ammunition and explosives Mike and Tom Blenden had up here in the Physical Therapy Department. They were going to unleash a living hell onto those unsuspecting men as soon as the SWAT team arrived and set up operations. This was the culmination of several weeks' work for Mike and his unwitting father. "You two, over here," Mike said, pointing his rifle at Bertha and me.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" she wailed. The woman looked ridiculous with that loose-fitting gown. She swayed back and forth as she staggered to her feet and shuffled barefoot across the cold tile floor. I walked behind her, my hands behind my head as Mike watched the two of us closely. "I didn't do anything."

I was waiting for her to say she was a civil servant.

"Shut up and come here," he said.

The two of us moved toward the first window. Mike was smiling like a Cheshire cat as he pressed his nose against the glass and chuckled out loud.

“They’re down there, crouching behind their goddamned black-and-whites like a bunch of ants,” he said in a thick voice. Then I watched his face twitch nervously as I heard a long, loud wailing siren come closer to the hospital. I recognized that special sound as belonging to the SWAT team wagon. His breathing increased and his hands shook as he peered angrily down at the street. “They’re here, pop. See them? See the guy who sent you to hell? He’s down there with the rest of them.”

Bertha and I stood at the head Of the first table, unsure of what to do. I was positive I didn’t plan any heroics. Both father and son were crazy enough to ventilate my body with a hail of bullets, then turn on Bertha and the rest of the people in the room. They were already guilty of murdering other people. A few more laying in pools of blood wouldn’t matter now.

“Outside,” Mike said, tearing himself away from the window and running up to me. I felt his left hand grab around my upper arm and pull me toward the doorway. He

shoved Bertha forward with the butt of his gun, warning her to keep quiet as we moved awkwardly out of the main therapy room. “Come on, dad,” Mike yelled over his shoulder.

“Down by the wall!” Mike said in a low growl as he crouched down and ran up against the four-foot high concrete embankment that ran around the perimeter of the hospital. The loose gravel crunched under my feet as I fell to my knees and crawled up against the hot concrete. Bertha wailed and whimpered softly as she scraped her legs on the sharp roofing stones. I looked ahead to where Mile and his father were crouching. The blond had pulled his crate of grenades and ammunition out to the roof before dragging us with him. He was ready for the initial surprise attack.

“Look at them. They’re so sure of themselves. They’re so fuckin’ positive they’ve got everything under control,” Mike said, smiling ironically and looking savagely at me as his left hand dipped into the opened crate. I kept thinking about the men down below, unaware of the death that was about to rain down on them. Mike pulled out five grenades, laying them all in a straight row by the low wall. His fingers fluttered over the

pineapple-shaped miniature bombs lovingly while he peered carefully over the top of the embankment down at the police.

“Like ducks, all of them,” Mike said, picking up one of the grenades and holding it tightly against his chest. For one crazy second I wasn’t sure if he was planning to heave it over the top, or pull the pin and blow him and the rest of us to bits.

“Ohhhh,” Bertha wailed as she reached around and grabbed me tightly. I tried to peer over her fat shoulders, but her body was blocking my view. I saw the rifle fall to the roof and Mike’s hands move about quickly.

“There she goes!” he cried.

I looked up and saw the five grenades arc into the air, one after another, hissing loudly as they fell to the earth in a curving line. I ground my teeth together, closing my eyes tightly and praying God Ed wasn’t in the vicinity of the grenades.

Then the living hell I’d feared broke loose. Both Bertha and I were thrown from the wall by the force of the multiple explosions. The air roared around us as the grenades exploded on the ground. I pulled myself off the hot roofing stones and looked dazed at the fat woman. She was lying face down, covering her head with both arms as

she sobbed hysterically. Her loose white gown fell open at the back, revealing her white, flabby skin and her two mammoth, blotched buttocks.

“Got ‘em!” I heard Mike cry out in triumph.

I scrambled to my feet and ran over to the embankment, looking down onto Sixth Street. What I saw was a scene of carnage. There were blotches of blood splashed across the sidewalk and north side of the street I could see even from this distance. The SWAT van lay on its side, its front windows shattered from the force of the blast. Two of the three police cars that had been parked as a blockade in front of the hospital’s main entrance were in flames. Wounded policemen ran in every direction from the blast site, their guns dangling uselessly in their hands. Shouts and yells filled the air, soon followed by another roaring explosion. The gas tank of the third police car finally ignited, engulfing the patrol car in flames.

“Get ‘em now, dad,” Mike said, bending down quickly and grabbing his rifle. I watched in horrified fascination as the young man and his father laid the rifle barrels on the top of the concrete low wall and took

aim. The air around me suddenly exploded as both men squeezed their triggers in rapid fire. I watched as one policeman, then another fell to the sidewalk or street as Mike and his father picked them off one by one.

“Stop it! You’re crazy!” I shouted. I couldn’t stand this. I ran up to Mike and grabbed him around the throat, pulling him back onto the roof and struggling to take away his rifle. I could feel his feet kicking my ankles and thighs as I wrenched the gun first to the right, then to the left. I’d never really fought another man hand-to-hand before, and it showed. With one quick twisting motion, he sent me flying to the right and crashing down next to the still-shrieking Bertha. I’m sure he’d have killed them then. But right now he was more interested in picking off the police.

“Damn it!” he cried out. The time I’d taken from him in the fight was enough for the remaining police to scramble to relative safety. I could hear them say words like “up there!” and “hospital”. I knew they knew where the bombs and shots came from. Only when Mike turned around and looked at me with an indescribable glare of hatred did I actually begin to fear for my life. “You Goddamned bastard!”

He was pointing the rifle barrel up at Bertha and me as if trying to decide who would be first. The woman rolled over on her ass and saw what was happening. She stopped her sobbing at once, sucking in a choking breath as she raised her hands protectively to her chest.

“Get up,” Mike said calmly to us.

I couldn’t believe he said those words. I expected shots, not orders.

“I said get UP!”

Bertha and I struggled to our feet. We leaned on one another for mutual support as we watched Mike stare at us. Suddenly he wheeled around quickly and pushed his head over the edge of the low wall.

“You cops down there! Can you hear me? I’ve got some people up here. You want to see them fly down?”

“OHHHHHHH!”

“Bertha, shut up!” I said between my teeth. Now I saw what he was going to do. He was using the two of us as hostages so he and his father could escape.

“Put down your guns and come out. Let them go,” we heard somebody shout out.

“We didn’t get him, dad. We didn’t get that fuckin’ Hansen,” Mike said, his eyes rolling wildly in his head as he crouched

down against the wall and hugged the rifle tightly to his chest. I realized then that the voice belonged to that SWAT team captain Mike was trying to kill.

“I said throw down your guns and come out. No deals.”

“You want to see pieces of them coming down?” Mike yelled over his shoulder, keeping his eyes fastened on us and even smiling as he said those words.

“Ohhhhh!” Bertha moaned again, closing her eyes and swaying back and forth. For a second I thought she was going to faint. I had to agree that the proposition of being thrown piecemeal down onto Sixth Street didn’t sound appealing to me either.

There was silence for what seemed like hours.

“You don’t believe I’ve got them up here?” Mike yelled. “Take a look. Okay you two, up on the ledge.”

“What?” I asked.

“Both of you. I want you on the wall—on top of it!” he almost screamed.

“Come on,” I said to Bertha, reaching down and taking her right hand in my left. I led her up to the embankment while Mike overturned the wooden crate and indicated

to us we were to use it as a kind of step to get to the top.

“You first,” he said to me.

I stepped on the crate with my left foot, then brought my right foot up to the top of the wall. The top was about eight inches wide, barely enough room for me to keep my balance.

“Next,” Mike said to Bertha.

The fat woman held her gown down with her left hand while she held tightly onto me with her right. I kept thinking she’d propel me off the wall onto Sixth Street as she lurched forward.

I grunted with the effort of hauling Bertha up to the top of the wall. She staggered forward, pulling me with her as she nearly lost her balance.

“Back, back,” I cried, pulling her right hand back gently as I spread my legs and shuffled my feet to keep my balance on the narrow ledge. I looked down as I told her to look away and suddenly remembered that screaming suicide who threatened to leap down from the attic window.

“I’ll blow him away, first, then her! I’ve got three more inside tied up! I’ll kill them one at a time until you let us out of here.”

I looked down and saw a sea of eyes and blue hats pointed up at us. In the center I could make out Ed. His face looked dirty, but he was all right. There was terror written over his face as he gaped open-mouthed at Bertha and me.

“What do you want?” a tall, silver-haired and square-jawed police commander in combat greens yelled up. Something told me this was the notorious Mr. Hansen Mike was after.

I looked down and saw a smile flash across the blond’s face. I was right.

“A fair exchange,” he said, pushing his head above the wall once again and peering down into the well-protected crowd of police officers. “You, Hansen, for everybody up here and a guarantee you won’t follow us for fifteen minutes.”

I held tightly onto the whimpering Bertha. Her gown ruffled in the hot dry wind as her toes hung over the front edge of the embankment. She held her left hand down in front of her in a desperate attempt to keep the front of her body covered.

“How do I know you’ll let me go when you’re out of here?” Hansen asked.

I heard Mike chuckling softly behind me. I wanted to yell down it was a trap. But I

wanted to survive this ordeal as well as prevent a bloodbath I knew would take place if I tried anything.

“You don’t, Hansen. You’ve got to trust me,” Mike yelled over the top of the low wall, ducking down again and checking his rifle to make sure it was fully loaded.

The wind howled in my ear as I felt my heart pounding wildly. The silence was so strong I wanted to scream.

“All right,” I heard Hansen yell.

Bertha and I sighed audibly with relief as we heard the SWAT commander agree to Mike Blenden’s demands. I started to turn around to get off when Mike motioned with the muzzle of his rifle to stay on the wall.

“Let them out now and come out with them. I’ll have a car ready for you when you get down here!”

“Oh, no you don’t, Hansen. I know you’ll be gunnin’ for me as soon as I step out the front door with them. You come up here or it’s no deal, and the guy goes off the ledge first.”

Bertha looked at me, her eyes widening in horror. She let go of my hand and pulled hers tightly to her chest, struggling to keep her balance by herself as she resigned me for lost.

I didn't hear any answer to Mike's last demand from Hansen.

"Guess they're going to need proof I mean what I say," Mike said, clicking back the receiver and pointing the barrel of his rifle at me. I saw him lower his head to the sight as he shifted the muzzle slightly to the right until it was directly in line with the center of my forehead. I closed my eyes and sucked in a ragged breath, waiting for the explosion that would be the last sound I'd hear.

"All right. You've got a deal!" Hansen yelled up from below. Mike froze for a second, still aiming the rifle at my head while his finger squeezed down on the trigger.

"He said okay!" I said in a hoarse voice, sweat trickling down the back of my neck. I was afraid the blond hadn't heard.

"I know. Just wanted to make you sweat a little," he said, lowering the rifle, then resting the long barrel against the rear edge of the low wall.

"Tell him to come up now," Mike said. I looked at him, then realized he had no intention of letting Hansen getting to the front door of the hospital. The police were crouched behind a row of parked cars on the opposite side of the street just west of the supermarket where the thieves were still

barricaded and were, strange to say, quiet. Hansen was standing between a '69 Mustang and a Chevy red van. Blenden would pick him off before he crossed the street. Then...? That didn't matter to him.

He was driven by one prime force—to get as many cops as possible before we went down. And even driving him more strongly than that concept was the desire to kill Bill Hansen, the man he felt was responsible for his father's mental and professional destruction.

“He wants you up here now,” I shouted as loudly as I could between my cupped hands. I could see Ed standing below to the right of the first burning police car. His gun hung uselessly from his right hand as he still gaped up at the teetering Bertha and me. I wondered if I'd ever get a chance to be held by him again.

“Tell him I'm coming,” Hansen yelled.

“No guns!” Mike said, springing up and pointing the muzzle of his rifle down into the street in Hansen's direction.

“No guns!” I shouted out.

Hansen reached down into his holster and pulled out his revolver, tossing it high in front of him. It clattered noisily in the deserted street.

“Dad!” Mike said out of the right corner of his mouth. I turned around and looked with Bertha at Tom Blenden. He’d been firing with his son earlier at the scattering police. Now he’d lapsed back into his former stupor, kneeling against the wall and staring off into space blankly. “Come on, dad,” Mike said, keeping one eye on Bill Hansen who was walking slowly out from behind the barricade of parked cars toward the main hospital entrance. He slid up against his father, nudging him with his right knee. “It’s him—the man who sent you out of the department—Bill Hansen.”

“Hansen,” the old man murmured, his hair blowing around in a sudden gust of hot wind. Bertha’s long hair and loose patient gown fluttered in the increasing wind as we watched the old man focus his eyes and mind on the present scene. “Where?”

“Down there, Dad. Walking across the street. He’s responsible for everything. Get him,” Mike whispered, pointing out Hansen with the long barrel of his gun. We watched in horror as the old man slowly rose from the surface of the roof and peered down at the figure in green now walking slowly across the broad yellow center strip running down Sixth Street.

“Hansen,” the old man muttered again, looking down but not pointing the gun down at him.

“Get him! Kill him!” Mike insisted. His eyes widened with incomprehension as his father looked dumbly onto the advancing Hansen. I struggled to keep my balance in the face of the now blasting hot wind as Mike grabbed his father tightly by the left arm and shook him. “KILL HIM!”

The old man turned and looked confusedly at his son.

“Why?”

The question stunned the blond. His mouth moved as if he were trying to say or ask something. Then he jerked back from his father and knelt in a firing position as he took aim at the approaching SWAT commander.

“NO!” the old man cried, lurching over and jerking the barrel of the rifle up just as it fired.

“OHHHHHHH!” Bertha screamed, teetering back and crashing down on her back as the father and son rolled away from the embankment and struggled for possession of the rifle. I looked down and saw Hansen running across the street, waving his right arm over his head in a signal for the

rest of the police to come. I saw Ed sprinting across the small sloping front lawn of the hospital before I turned and jumped off the wall. The old man might have looked like a hollow shell, but he still had the strength to successfully fight off his son. Holding the boy tightly by the throat with his left hand, he yanked the rifle from the gagging Mike and threw it over the top of the wall.

“Why? Why?” Mike sobbed as his father relaxed his grip on his son.

“Bill’s my friend. Bill’s my friend! Why did you want to hurt him?”

I walked over to the two men as I heard the sound of clattering footsteps coming up the stairs. Bertha rose to her feet, pushing her hair out from her eyes as Ed and Hansen ran out onto the roof with their guns drawn. Mike lay on his back, his right hand stretched over his face while his father sank back into his private world. Over us the roaring Santa Ana winds swept the thick brown smog out of the Los Angeles basin...



“Had enough excitement this week?” Ed asked as he took another sip from his drink.

He'd arrived ten minutes before, smiling broadly with other than official business on his mind. That was fine with me. I'd had enough excitement with the world of officialdom to last me for a lifetime.

"You know, Paul Thatcher wanted me to ride with him again this week?" I said, laughing as I poured my wine and put the bottle back down on the cocktail table. I walked slowly over to Ed until I was only a few inches from him. Clinking our glasses together in a silent toast, we drank while looking hotly into each other's eyes.

"Did you accept?"

I laughed again, putting my drink down on the cocktail table next to the wine bottle and walking closer to Ed. I could feel his hot breath against my face as I murmured out something unintelligible and pressed my body against his. I felt a world of misunderstanding and non-communication slipping away from me as the two of us melted together. For the first time I felt that ever-present universe of raging destruction that hovers over all of us being pushed a few millimeters away. That screaming suicidal woman of a few days ago, Mike, his demented father—all the horrors that rose up like accusing spectators or premonitions

of things to come faded away as I felt Ed's strong, warm body press against me.

"Let's forget about the drink," Ed said thickly, grabbing my right arm and pulling me toward the couch. I couldn't agree with him more. For the first time I actually felt close to someone. It was as if that big blond cop standing next to me were an extension of myself.

As I sat down next to Ed in my tiny one-room flat all the events of the past few days swept over my mind in one flash. It was as if Ed's proximity had finally released some block which had prevented me from understanding what had happened around me or from feeling for those involved. I felt a new kind of knowledge—the kind defying verbal description—suddenly light my mind like a million candles. I understood without being able to express that understanding yet.

"Penny for your thoughts," Ed said, lying back on the couch and pulling me closer to him.

I smiled at the ridiculous remark, then fell sideways against him. I was incredibly happy.

THE END